

MISSING



LONDON: J.&R. MAXWELL.

MISSING

BY

MARY CECIL HAY,

AUTHOR OF "OLD MYDDELTON'S MONEY," "DOROTHY'S VENTURE,"
ETC., ETC.



LONDON

JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. IN THE CITY	5
II. THE COUSINS	10
III. IN THE COUNTRY	14
IV. GOOD BYE	16
V. "YOUR OWN SON"	21
VI. AFTER TWO YEARS	26
VII. TO BRIGHTON	30
VIII. RENOUNCED!	39
IX. ON THE ALERT	43
X. "PURSUED IN LOVE"	51
XI. "UPHEAVING TIDES"	58
XII. "LIFE'S RESTLESS SEA"	64
XIII. "BREAK, BREAK, BREAK"	68
XIV. "THROUGH THE SHADOWS"	73
XV. THE EDGE OF THE SWORD	75
XVI. "WITH HEART AND HAND"	81
XVII. "LOVE'S HEAVY BURDEN"	83
XVIII. "THE DEAD PAST"	87

UNDER LIFE'S KEY.

I. ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER	90
II. ADRIFT	99
III. MEETING THE BLOW	109
IV. "FALSE FLEW THE SHAFT"	115
V. FROM DRURY'S DESK	121

BACK TO THE OLD HOME.

I.	LEFT ALONE	..	..	..	..	129
II.	WRECKED	..	..	..	..	134
III.	A CHILD NO MORE	..	..	..	..	139
IV.	THE UNDERCURRENT	..	..	..	..	142
V.	"WHERE THE BROOK AND RIVER MEET"					146
VI.	FOR HER DEAR SAKE ...	..	..	..	..	147
VII.	TOWARDS THE OLD HOME	..	..	..	..	151
VIII.	GATHERING SHADOWS	..	..	..	..	153
IX.	DREADING MY LONELINESS	..	..	..	..	160
X.	OVER THE FALLEN LEAVES	..	..	..	..	163
XI.	THE DAY'S TURMOIL	..	..	..	..	168
XII.	AFTER THE DAYS TURMOIL	..	..	..	..	172
XIII.	FAREWELL	..	..	..	..	175
XIV.	MY LAST EFFORT	..	..	..	..	178
XV.	MAY'S HOME	..	..	..	..	182

	A DARK INHERITANCE	187
	A SHADOW ON THE THRESHOLD	245
	DOLF'S BIG BROTHER	302

MISSING!

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CHAPTER I.

IN THE CITY.

For fully six hours every other office in Gresham House had been vacated and locked into silence, when the last occupant quietly closed the outer door of his handsome suite of offices; and traversing the lofty passages, so slowly that each step seemed an unwilling one, went out into Old Broad Street. So unfrequented the City seemed in the comparative stillness of the June midnight that this man, who had known it only in the noisy business hours, looked around him, scarcely recognizing where he was, like one who comes from darkness into a glare of light. Yet the gaslit streets, in their unfamiliar aspect, seemed to hold him jealously among them, for again and again he passed the great closed buildings where so much of the world's work is done; looking upon them as a man might look if he knew it was for the last time; loitering as a man loiters only when he dreads to reach the destination awaiting him. Slowly he went round the Bank of England, then passed backwards and forwards in the grim shadow behind the Exchange; only his own footsteps and the measured tread of a policeman breaking the silence of the short paved thoroughfare. But, each time he reached the familiar stone figure of old George Peabody, he paused before it, glancing backward, in his mind, through two men's lives. Presently he walked back, still slowly, on the way he had come, re-passing the noble front of Gresham House with head down-bent, as if it could not be but that some one would look from the familiar rooms—even in this midnight silence—and recognize him. Then a fascination seized him to pass its other front; yet, when he had gone round into Bishopsgate Street, he did not lift his head, or give one look up to the windows, near one of which he had left his open desk and papers. But a few moments afterwards he made a deliberate pause before the old palace on

the opposite side of the street, and raised his eyes. They were only outside lights that gleamed upon the tiny panes of the old windows, but he started and looked down again, as if there had been watching eyes behind; and without a second glance he walked straight on, until he saw the river before him, and with a sudden impulse turned aside.

"This is a novelty," he said to himself, making his way, a little less slowly now, along the narrow pavement and among the scattered passengers in Thames Street. "Well, I will see how that old Royal Prison looks in such a light. How long is it since I drove there last with my little Theo——" He snapped the thought abruptly, and whistled softly to himself, as if to keep thought of every kind at bay. Yet thought was strangely restless to-night, wandering in tracks unfrequented, through the long years during which it had been guided rigidly upon that smooth, raised road which only the wealthy travel. Was not thought harassing him now, showing him everywhere faded forms and weary faces? Had he ever before been worried by a tired lad lifting the heavy shutters of a late-open shop? Even now was he not pausing before the iron gates of Billingsgate, because a man who came from the darkness within to try whether the gates were fast looked thin and sickly? And, when he came into the shadow of the silent Mint Tower, did not thought drearily suggest that the sentinels in their dull routine must be weighed down with sleep? What a life was this to struggle for!

Slowly he retraced his steps, and then, with a strange attraction for the river he had been hitherto avoiding—he turned to cross London Bridge. The silent night hour, which had changed the City streets to this man, who knew them well, had changed the river too, disfiguring the craft upon its dark and heavy breast, and making blurred reflections, like lights drowned beneath its black and cruel waters. The recesses of the bridge were filled with huddled, crouching figures, some opening languid eyes as the quiet, steady step passed, but most of them sleeping; some few with the luxury of a dirty sack under the weary head. They were all men or boys, and some were old, so old that the passer-by caught himself wondering how so many years could have been spent to bring nothing but *this* at the last. With never an uttered word, though his gaze passed by not one of the exhausted figures, he crossed the bridge and paused upon the southern side, looking still down upon the river.

"Cab, sir?"

The hollow, brisk voice startled him, and he turned, glancing beyond the slouching, shabby fellow who had addressed him, to a table spread under what seemed to be a gigantic umbrella, where

a grave and portly man presided over a steaming coffee urn and innumerable cups and saucers. Perhaps it may not have been unusual for this genial and observant old fellow to see a gentleman come sauntering up to his coffee stall at two o'clock in the morning; but, if it were, no one could have read that fact while he seemed engrossed by his own occupation. Yet when, a few days afterwards, his information was needed he could exactly describe the gentleman who stood opposite him at his lighted stall. "I couldn't guess his age," he said in conclusion, "for those close-cropped, fair men, with no hair on their lips or cheeks are hard to guess, and when I say he looked thirty I know that forty would be nearer the mark. He was a gentleman, I saw that, and very pale; but he looked more as if the paleness belonged to him than as if it had just come. What I noticed most was his gloves. Few of my customers come in cream-coloured gloves with brown silk workings—Yes, those are the gloves. And his hat was a tip-topper. It had never been shined up, and I can tell ye the man who bought it would never look twice at a couple of guineas."

"Fine night, sir."

The observation came from over the shoulder of the gentleman who had so quietly come up beneath the huge umbrella, and he answered it, almost as if relieved to speak at last, even to this unwholesome-looking object.

"Hungry sir?" inquired the persistent vagabond, with a friendly (and possibly interested) curiosity. "Not, sir?" in infinite astonishment, pushing back the worn fur cap upon his head. "Then maybe you've had somethin' since mornin'."

The remark was scarcely worth pondering, yet it threw Theodore Hurst into a long thought. When had he eaten last? He remembered trying at breakfast time, when his little girl sat opposite him, talking to him, surprised at his silence. He recollected taking one of his creditors to lunch with him, recklessly ordering the rarest dishes, and laughing and talking ceaselessly; but he could not remember that he had really eaten throughout the day. Again he abruptly broke the thread of thought.

"Can you drink a cup of coffee?" he asked the gaunt and haggard fellow beside him.

"Can I drink a cup o' coffee?" he repeated, cheerfully. "You stand treat, an' you'll see."

With a sensation of dull relief, the gentleman who stood treat did indeed see; and, while he saw, listened patiently to an unceasing, glib harangue.

"If you'd just come out o' The Tench," the man said, breaking off at last, "you'd enjoy this untoxicatin' liquor, my pet."

"You have been in prison, then?" questioned Mr. Hurst, with a long, grave look into the man's wan, humorous face.

"Jest a few times, my dear. P'raps," with an indescribable contortion of one eye-lid, "I'd better say just a few score o' times. I've tried 'em all as a matter of conscience, an' they've all their faults; but give me Coldbath Fields."

"You have tried them all!" reiterated his listener, with no smile for the terms of endearment. "You must be an honest fellow."

"I don't deny it, my pet. Bread an' butter? Thankye. There's no better in the City. Yes," he went on, with the evident intention of making things fair by entertaining his entertainer, "they take care o' ye in Coldbath Fields. Worst is, there ain't much difference in the treadmill, go where ye may. Up we go." As he spoke he turned aside, and pulling his old fur cap over his eyes, stamped with slow measured tread, warming to the familiar prison step, like an old hunter roused to the cry of the hounds; while a policeman, who had been slowly passing, stopped to watch. "There we go. Twenty minutes o' that time, my pet, an' then they gives ye a Bible to rest ye. Bless ye, after twenty minutes o' *that* yer eyes are dropping out o' yer head, an' sleep's the thing ye want. Another cup? Well, I won't say no, my dear, an' it would be wastin it to take it without bread an' butter—as ye meant to say. Thankye. I've not had a cheerfuller supper since I took up my last profession. Cab, sir?" The last two words were added in a startlingly different tone—the professional tone of the professional cab-touter.

"Do you mean to say you earn a living by cadging for cabs here—and at night?"

"Yes, my dear. I'm shy in the daytime. I was born shy, an I can't get over it. At nights I feel manly, an' the night air's reckmended me. At nights I'm a busy an' successful chap, an' the peelers touch their 'ats to me, an' give me their advice about investin' my money. Goin', my dear. Shake 'ands."

Not many days afterwards the old jail-bird recalled this uncondced request, and, with a very meaning laugh and shrug, looked down upon his dirty hand. Mr. Hurst's white hands were in his pockets now, as he slowly threaded the ugly southern street, recrossed the river by Blackfriars Bridge, and walked along the embankment. Here, too, every seat was occupied, but the sleepers were not now all men and boys. The greater number here were women, and Theodore Hurst caught himself glancing with unconscious scrutiny into each sleeping face; for there were young girls so nearly the age of his own child that momentarily he lost the stern self-suppression of this night. Could women

bear the burden and heat of the day only to earn such nights as these? Could such sleep refresh or fit them for the morrow's toil? He had come within the shadow of St. Stephen's before he found one vacant seat; then he threw himself upon it, wearily, yet with every power wide awake. "As a boy," he said to himself, presently, "I saw the sun rise once from here—as a boy when I knew Wordsworth's sonnet, and came here to enjoy it. Ridiculous! How can the river be 'flowing at its own sweet will' between these walls and buildings? Ridiculous! Yet, just for this once, I will see the sun rise again.

"What a fool he was to talk so much about prisons! And want to shake hands—with me!"

The hours went on, and most of the homeless on the river bank slept, undisturbed even by the clamorous chiming from Westminster tower, though some awoke with a shiver in that cold meeting of the dying night and new-born day. But the man who sat alone upon the most western seat, neither slept nor stirred, but looked before him with wide-open—even watchful—eyes, until the sun appeared, red and round, above the chimneys opposite. Higher and higher it rose, its hue fading every moment now, until it was pale and vague and high above the roofs.

"Who would believe," thought Mr. Hurst, watching it still, "how presently it will scorch, and burn, and—kill."

Then he rose, and, tilting his hat upon his eyes, gave one backward glance along the embankment. A group of men, with picks upon their shoulders, were already coming to work upon the road, and—some languidly, some with brisk resolution—those who had spent their night beside the river, were rising to go to the day's work.

"Before it sets," he said, with a swift movement of his eyes, not past the sun, but its reflection in the water, "all London will know." Then, without another backward glance, he set his face westward.

Another hour later, while his own sleepy servants were opening the shutters of his handsome house in Lancaster Gate, and while the world was opening its eyes to the gift of another summer day, he walked into the Great Western terminus, and, strolling down the platform, addressed a porter, coolly, and with the air of a man accustomed to receive service.

"Get me a ticket, will you? Which is the down train?"

"This, sir. A ticket where to?"

"To— How far does this train go? Liverpool? Get me a first-class for Liverpool, and I can get out where I choose."

"Return, sir?"

"Return?" Mr. Hurst repeated the word as if pondering,

but the man saw the colour rising oddly in his race. "No, not return, I think."

He took from his waistcoat pocket a couple of sovereigns, and the man wondered, seeing gold carried loosely so, and no purse forthcoming. When he brought the ticket and the change, the gentleman, on whom he had so willingly waited, looked down quizzically upon the eleven shillings in the man's palm.

"You'd better keep it," he said. "Yes, keep it. I daresay you have—debts."

Rather deprecatingly the man closed his fingers upon the silver, and with obsequious briskness, opened the door of an empty first-class carriage; closing it with a very demonstrative purpose of preventing intruders upon this generous passenger. And the passenger sat with folded arms until the train had left the station, then, with a sigh of relief, took off his hat, lay back against the cushions, and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER II.

THE COUSINS.

"You speak as if I did not understand the difference between right and wrong, Fräulein."

"You act as if you did not, Theo."

"Then—perhaps I do not."

The girl stood against the school-room table, a little stoop in her slender figure, a little smile on her small, brunette face; while the governess, knowing so well the glance she should meet if she lifted her own grave eyes, worked on in silence. But the silence, being a silence of displeasure, hurt the girl more sorely than outspoken words of blame, and she broke it herself, in a quiet, passionate way, tears gathering between the lids of her dark, lustrous eyes.

"I often think I do not. Something comes and blurs the lines for me. If you or mother tell me what to do, I do it *because* you tell me, and I know it is right to do because you bid me do it. But when I've only my instincts to guide me—"

"Instincts, Theo?"

"What shall I say then? My own heart—"

"Ah, there!" the governess had risen now, and laid her hands gently on her pupil's shoulders, "there, my dear, you touch the very source of what it so often grieves me to complain of. In everything your heart rules you. Dear, there is a higher guid-

ance for our conduct than the instinct (as you call it) to please, or help, or spare those you love. Love must not be your only teacher."

"Does it really grieve you to complain of me?" the girl asked, with such happy, shining eyes that she scarce seemed to have heard the latter part of her governess's speech.

"It does indeed, especially now that we are so soon to part."

"Explain exactly what you mean, dear," the girl said, with a warm kiss, but no very apparent penitence, "and I will cure it."

"I think you understand," the Fräulein answered, avoiding the great questioning eyes which sought hers. "For instance, you know what you said to your mother yesterday when she was starting for Richmond."

"You know," the girl said, in tender, whispered tones, "what mother said to me."

"She told you she had been asleep when your father left his room, and that he did not awake her, though she was going away for a week, and she asked you whether he had given you any message for her."

"No," put in Theo, with a swift, vivid blush, "she asked me *what* message father left for her. So I said—I said,"—the lips twitched a little, but the eyes were radiantly defiant—"he hoped she would enjoy herself, and take care of herself, and come back soon. And that he left her his love and a parting kiss. I gave her the kiss, and it was as good to her—dear mother!—as if he had—remembered. He seldom does remember, Fräulein. That was all."

"And it made her heart light, dear, and her going pleasant, but—it was not the truth. Your father scarcely spoke to you yesterday morning, never of your mother; and the message you gave her was a falsehood, Theo. Harsh as the word sounds, I must use it."

"Then I ought to have let her go away, sad and depressed? What good then, would her visit to Richmond have done her?"

"You need not excuse your motive, dear," was the quiet answer. "It is the act that is wrong and the motive will not justify it. You must not do evil yourself, even though it may spare your mother—"

The words died abruptly as the door was opened, and a young lady, passing the servant who tried to announce her, came with shy eagerness up to Theo.

"I had to drive from Euston Station alone," she said, "and so I came round here. Oh, Theo, what little girls we were when we last met!"

"You are not a very big one now," smiled Theo, after greeting

her cousin; "but we are both old, aren't we, Angel? I leave off lessons in a few days, and you were grown up a year ago—your letters said."

"Yes, I'm eighteen; a little older than you, though you are the taller. Papa says all women should be little, so I don't mind."

"I think so too," said Theo, watching rather intently, while her cousin greeted the Fräulein. "How unexpectedly you have come, Angel!"

"I travelled from Derry to Euston with some friends of papa's, but I am to manage the rest of my journey alone. Aunt Burtle is in Onslow Square now, so I am going there first, and on to Brighton with her, when she goes."

"You don't mean to say," cried Theo, with a puzzled gaze into Angel Sullivan's calm blue eyes, "that you are going to stay with Mrs. Burtle?"

"How strange of you to call her Mrs. Burtle! She is your grandmother, Theo, your father's mother!"

"Are you going—to her?"

"Yes, dear. I hoped you knew. I am only invited to pay a visit, but Aunt Burtle told papa privately that, if I make myself useful and pleasant to her, she will perhaps adopt me."

"Poor Angel!"

"Poor? No, just the opposite, dear," cried the elder girl, wondering over the shadow in her cousin's eyes. "Not only is this a splendid chance for me, Theo, but, besides that, I never was so far from poor as I am at this moment. What do you think? I've got seventy pounds of my own! Even yet I can scarcely believe it. It is my fortune, and I am to spend it all on myself, to look nice and feel independent. I am to dress fashionably now for the first time in my life, and order what I like when I see what is worn, and enjoy having money of my own until Aunt Burtle adopts me. Oh! Theo, won't the spending be delicious to me?"

"I can fancy so."

"Don't laugh at me, if you cannot understand. Remember that I have never before had even seventy shillings to call my own. I've never had a dress really made for me by a dress-maker. I've never bought a bonnet ready trimmed and taken my own choice. I have not possessed any of the luxuries so familiar to you that you never even guess what their absence would be. And oh! Theo," she added, with a pretty, timid glance into her cousin's thoughtful face, "you can never imagine the responsibility my luggage feels, because of those bank-notes hidden among it. I cannot bear it out of my sight. I go on spending

the money all the while in my own mind. You never ask me how I got it, Theo."

"How was it?" the girl asked, smiling, because she did not know how these words she thought so light and selfish, would haunt her presently.

"It has been accumulating for me ever since—I suppose ever since I was born. Presents of money that were given me as a child, and little sums added just as papa could afford them. And they have all been in the Savings Bank till yesterday, when I had a presentation. Oh, Theo, I cried quite as much as I laughed, to feel myself so rich; and I'm sure the others all laughed and cried too."

"How sad for you to come away from them!" said Theo, while the German lady's eyes went slowly from the prettily rounded face, with its shining hair and forget-me-not eyes, to the mobile face above, with its smooth brown skin and soft carnation tints. "A face full of faults," she said to herself, "as the character is, and yet——"

"Of course I shall go home sometimes, Theo—" The words scattered the Fräulein's thought, and she quietly went away and left the girls alone—"and I shall be helping them most this way. There are so many of us to grow up, one by one, while papa's living is so very poor.. And, as we see no one in that dull little Irish village, they did not wish me to spend my best years there. You could never understand it, Theo, living here in a beautiful house in the best part of London, with everything you want. Why, even in Ireland we hear of you; of the splendid parties Uncle Theodore gives, of the fine horses he and you ride, of aunt's dresses, and—oh, everything! So I am sure you cannot understand how my absence will help them at home. Papa says marriageable daughters are so expensive."

"I never heard my father say that," put in Theo, dreamily.

"Of course not," cried Angel Sullivan, with a suspicious brightness in her eyes. "How could he, when he is so rich? At home we always talk of him as if he were the richest man in London. When I was little I thought he sat in a beautiful room in the City all day receiving bank notes. My ideas are still vague on the point."

"So are mine," put in Theo, demurely.

"But you know how rich he is, and that you are his only child."

"One fair daughter and none other child," quoted Theo, laughing. "But how does that account for your going voluntarily to live with the hardest, narrowest, suspiciousest, selfishest old lady in Brighton?"

"Don't look so disdainful, Theo," observed her cousin, smiling into the flashing eyes. "I remember that very look upon your face once when we were children visiting Aunt Burtle, and she took all your money away because you bought me an extravagant present. Fortunately she had none to take from me."

"Suppose she takes yours now," said Theo, with a warm flash of merriment in her eyes. "Just fancy her taking possession of that seventy pounds."

"I could not fancy anything so terrible. But I can think of something besides my wonderful wealth, dear, though you don't believe it. I wish Aunt Burtle were *my* grandmother as she is yours, for I think I could love her more easily then, and obey and amuse her more naturally. I see you cannot believe I wish it, but I do. I want to help and cheer her, while at the same time my absence helps them all at home."

"Hush, Angel," said Theo, with a deepening of the colour in her soft, dark cheeks, "don't excuse yourself to me. You know best what is right. I never know. I only—could not do as you are doing."

"You have no need," was the slow answer. "Compare your father's income with my father's; this beautiful house with our shabby little place; your staff of servants with our one maid; your dresses with what I have always worn. Compare them all, and don't blame me, Theo, but be grateful that it is different with you."

"I am," the girl said; and then a strange and sudden silence fell between the cousins, as if a shadow touched them from the time to come.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE COUNTRY.

WHILE the slow third-class train for Liverpool stood in one of the quiet village stations, more than half an hour's journey from the great seaport, a gentleman left one of the first-class carriage, and, with a swift and resolute step, walked through the little station out into the road, giving up to the ticket-collector, who had stopped him, a ticket for Liverpool. Then he went down a narrow, shadowy lane into one of the prettiest valleys England boasts. He walked with a restless and unequal step, but yet with an evident purpose in view; and now and then, as he walked, he took off his hat and carried it, lifting his head to meet the languid summer breeze.

Without glancing about him, he passed presently through a straggling village. A group of children, chattering merrily as they ran out from the school-house, separated silently when they came upon him, and let him go well upon his way before they followed. Two men, talking at the door of the village inn, touched their hats to him involuntarily; but they stopped their discussion and looked after him with an unaccountable and uncomfortable interest. A woman at her cottage door gave him a prompt "good day, sir," but turned into her cottage, without waiting for a possible reply; yet noticing that her son's invalided sheep dog, which had been lying outside the cottage in the sun, had crept in after her, and stood now facing the door with wide pathetic eyes. Close to this cottage a field path led across the meadows to the village church, and here the solitary traveller paused, looking along it to the grey tower, square and still among the tremulous trees. As he stood so, the sweet June silence was broken by a tolling bell. One by one the sad clear notes rang out, and the listener started back a moment, and lifted his hand to his head. When was it he had heard that note before? Not from this spot though; it was unbearable from here. With slow, uncertain fingers he unlatched the gate, closed it noiselessly behind him, and went on along the narrow path; while the sad single notes grew louder every minute now, until they seemed to deafen him when he walked softly through the churchyard and stood within the shadow of the porch. The heavy door was set wide open, and he entered the church mechanically. It was so strange—like the reality of a dream which never strikes the dreamer as unreal—to find the church hung with black, and solemn music filling it; and, almost as if he acted unconsciously he quietly entered a deep, square pew close to the door. The sides of the pew were high enough to screen him from the sight of anyone, and he sat with his arms folded and his head bent upon his chest, while the slow, solemn notes of the organ and the singers died, and a speaker's words fell gravely on the stillness. On this one man's ear they fell vaguely, scarcely comprehended, and yet they clung to him and re-echoed for a brief while, even when at last the voice ceased and there was a silence in the church—after that hushed tread of the slow, sad procession leaving it with their shrouded burden.

How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?

Slowly and softly, upon the silence haunted by these words the music of the organ stole. The organist, who felt himself alone in the church, while the little crowd stood round the open grave, played to his own grave thoughts; yet, to the one listener

Unseen in the deep shadowy pew, the notes were growing loud and discordant now, while he rose to his full height, and gazed around the gloomy, black-draped building—gazed as if he could not see. Then he turned swiftly and suddenly to listen—not to the organ notes, for they were pealing, echoing, vibrating round him, deafeningly, he thought; but to some fancied sound far off. And, as he stood so, he brought one hand slowly from his breast and lifted it to his face, the fingers clenched on something that he held.

“We meekly beseech Thee, O Father, to raise us from the death of sin——”

The quiet, serious voice ceased suddenly, and the group around the open grave looked up in wondering awe; for from the church there echoed, through the summer stillness, the clear and unmistakable reverberation of a pistol shot.

CHAPTER IV.

GOOD-BYE.

THEODORA HURST was sitting alone that evening in the school-room at Lancaster Gate, for she felt less lonely there than in the lofty drawing-rooms, or even in her mother's morning-room, where everything reminded her of her mother's absence. In the dining-room, dinner was laid for the master of the house, and Theo (who had dined early with the Fräulein) was listening for his return, while she played softly to herself, trying not to feel the house so large, and herself so solitary.

“Henley,” she said, without turning, when some one entered the room, for she felt sure it was the butler, come in once more to express astonishment at his master's delay, “you shall send to Gresham House, please. Let James take a hansom, and keep it while he inquires in the offices, for I am anxious—rather.”

“Theo!”

“Oh, Jack,” the girl cried, rising to meet the gentleman who had entered in so familiar a manner, “is it you? Have you seen father to-day?”

“No to the latter question. Yes to the former. Why are you alone, Theo?”

He still held the hand that she had given him, and was looking intently into the pretty, eager face; while she smiled to meet the gaze, not reading it aright, because she herself felt nothing of

the pain which for him was always mingled with the pleasure of a meeting with her.

"Because father hasn't come home yet, Jack, and Fräulein had an appointment with the Wilsons. You know they have engaged her, and she starts with them in a few days for Madrid. How sorry I shall be to lose her! She would not be so late now, only that she thinks father is here. As he did not come home at all yesterday evening, we felt sure of him to-day."

"Is he often away an evening and night?"

"Oh, no. I fancy he went down to Richmond to see mother, and stayed."

"I know he was not at *his* mother's, at any rate," said Captain Leslie, with a smile, "for I went to Onslow Square last night to bid her good-bye."

"Then you saw Angel!" cried Theo, utterly unaware of any sadness in his tone. "Isn't she pretty?"

"Is she?" he asked, in a pondering way, as he looked straight into Theo's eyes. "Do you know any man who could call her pretty—to you?"

"Every man would who had taste," the girl said, promptly, and without the faintest blush. "You really liked her, Jack, didn't you?"

"Very much, for she talked to me of you."

"How dull!" laughed Theo. And then she looked coolly and critically into his face—a handsome, grave young face—and wondered why he was not quite the same to-night as he had always been; the thoughtful, gentle, brave young fellow, whose companionship was such a natural thing to her. "You said my good-bye would be the last, Jack."

"And it will. When you awake to-morrow, we shall be on our way to India."

"So soon!" she said, with a sigh which she made no attempt to conceal. "Then what shall we do now? Play chess—or whist with dummies—or talk?"

"You put that last, of course. Well, I will not choose it, nor will I ask you to sing to me, for that would be harder still. Yes, let us play,—anything."

What they really played neither of them ever distinctly recollected, but they had successfully kept sad thoughts at bay, when, in an hour's time, the German governess looked in and stopped to chat and say good-bye before she went up-stairs. When she had left them again, Captain Leslie turned for his last farewell.

"Is it really for years and years, Jack?"

"For years and years," he echoed, taking both her hands together between his own. "Are you sorry, Theo—ever so slightly sorry?"

"Not slightly, Jack, but deeply sorry. I shall miss you every day."

"Scarcely," he said, with but a poor attempt at smiling. "You have everything you need without me."

"Every single thing that the heart of a girl can desire," put in Theo, tranquilly.

"Health, wealth, youth, beauty, friends, and—" the young man paused a moment, a flush rising in his sunburnt face—"lovers."

"Not yet," said Theo, with a laugh so heartwhole that his heart sank, "unless I count father and mother as lovers, and the dear little Fräulein and you."

"You know you must count me one," he said, in quiet, intense earnestness. "You know how I love you, Theo. Everything I say and do shows you, though I have never told you. I have tried not to tell you, knowing how wretchedly I should go away if you refused me. I even would not have come to-night if I had known you were alone, I should have been so afraid of hearing—but fate was stronger than my will, you see. Theo, will you give me one word of hope to take with me to live upon for these long years that I must be away? No, it is unfair to ask you," he broke off, passionately. "I knew that, and tried to resist. Theo, my dear, don't look so sorry. I will unsay it all. I will go to my duty like a man, and leave my little friend free and happy. I will not say a word to you of love. I know that I am only a friend to you, and I will be content with that—grateful for that. As if you possibly could love me yet,"—with a brave attempt at carelessness. "How absurd! No, I only came to say good-bye, and we had better say it."

"Not yet," said Theo, with an easy gentleness which would have been impossible to him. "Stay longer on this last day, Jack."

"No. I would rather go now. Try not to forget me, Theo; but I'm glad—I hope I'm glad—that you will not have such a longing all these years as I shall have, and that you will not be alone. You will have your father's strong protection, dear——"

"Oh, yes," she said, because he paused, and with a smile of brightest confidence.

"And your mother's loving care. Ah! how your eyes gladden at that thought; yet there will come a day when you will love some one even better than you love your mother."

"No," said Theo, very softly. "It is not possible."

"With you it will be loving *entirely*," he went on, thoughtfully; "and yet—— Well, I pray it may not be until——" then he paused, remembering what he had promised. "Now, my—little friend, good-bye."

Once more he took her hands, and held them for a minute, then he bent his head and laid his lips upon them, with an old-fashioned reverence. But Theo looked up, smiling.

"Jack, isn't that a farewell for mother, not for me? I don't forget what you have been to me ever since I can remember. I don't forget that you are going away for long, long years. Why, you are like my brother, Jack, and ought you to be so deferential to a younger sister, who has often been a worry to you? You used to kiss me every day, you know. Kiss me now, Jack,—my dear, dear old playfellow."

Her eyes were clear and candid in all their unfeigned regret; and the soft carnation in her cheeks had not deepened by one shade, when, still with her hands in his, she raised her face for his kiss. But, when he had given it, he left her hurriedly, before she could see the pallor of his face.

"Theo dear," said Fräulein Wedeker, entering while the girl still stood, "there is a gentleman in the library wishing to see Miss Hurst. Henley brought the card to me. Shall I go for you? Do you know the name? The Reverend Lewis Sterne, Little Darben, Lancashire."

"It ought to be Lawrence," said Theo, glancing at the card. "No, I don't know him; but clergymen often come to mother about subscriptions. She is so generous. Perhaps some one mother helps is sick. I will go. I wonder whether I have enough in my purse to give in mother's name?"

She counted her money, and the Fräulein looked on smiling, glad that this little interruption had occurred to break the heavy half hour after Captain Leslie's departure, though she was in her heart well aware that only to him had there been any anguish in the farewell. She would order tea against Theo's return, and they would have it cozily together, and Theo would be sure to have something amusing to tell her, and should not be allowed to think of the parting to-night with her old friend, or the other parting awaiting her.

With a sigh at the thought of her own share in this other parting, the German lady lay back in her easy chair and tried not to think, while she waited for Theo. Henley brought in the tray, and laid an elaborate supper tea slower even than was his wont.

"Then Mr. Hurst has not returned?" observed Miss Wedeker, noticing the butler's unexpected presence.

"No, ma'amselle. Nor has James come home. Miss Theo sent him into the City, feeling h anxiously."

"Oh!"

The table was laid, the lamps lighted, and the blinds drawn between the bright, homely scene and the June twilight fading in

the park; but a long hour had passed before the Fräulein heard the step for which she listened, and gladly rose to take her place at the table.

"You have been long, dear. I have grudged every minute given to a stranger, while I——" The words were strangled by a quick, gasping breath. "Theo, my child, what is it?"

"What is it?" the girl echoed, in a low, scared whisper, her eyes wandering over the Fräulein's face, as if she could not see it.

"My dear," the governess cried, passionately longing to kiss and embrace the girl, but literally afraid to do so, while she stood so still, with her fingers closed on something that she held, and her eyes dark and unnatural in the white cold face. "My dear, don't look so terrified. Has anything happened?"

"Yes," the girl said, still in that strange whisper. "Father is dead."

"Dead!"

"Hush! That is not it. Don't say it. Father has shot himself. Do you understand? Do I say the words? They are around me in flame, but I don't know whether—I've heard them—or say them. I only see them all the time—red."

"My darling Theo——"

"It was——" the girl's slow whisper was terrible to hear—"in church. He shot himself—in church—this afternoon. His face——"

"Impossible!" cried the Fräulein, with sudden energy. "It is some ghastly mistake."

"I—thought so," the girl said, with panting breath; the misery growing and deepening in her wide dry eyes; "for they could not recognise him; but I was wrong. It is—true, and it was—father."

Oh! my dear, is that proved to you?"

"Yes." So forlornly the slow single word fell on the silence.

"How dare that stranger bring you the tidings in this way—unexpected!" cried Miss Wedeker, angry with herself because she had not been able to spare the child.

"He was very kind," Theo said. "He would not write. He is waiting to see you, and he will come to-morrow."

"I will go to him, but it was cruel to you, my child. How did he know where to come to?"

"Father's address was with his name—it always was—in his hat. And it is here." She glanced down upon her hands, still tightly clasping something, and Miss Wedeker saw that she held her father's gloves.

"And that was all, dear?" she asked, gently touching the closed fingers. "Had he no papers with him?"

"No," said Theo, catching her breath hurriedly. "No papers

—as if he knew. No watch or purse—or——Oh, Fräulein, he—he had—prepared."

"And had forgotten that his name was in his hat and gloves. I see. Theo, my poor darling, do not stand so. Sit down, love."

"James has come—from the City," the girl went on, her slight form shivering as she spoke, though otherwise quite motionless, "and one of the clerks. I know they fear—ruin, but they do not dream of—this."

"I'm going now, dear," interrupted the governess, with a wild effort to throw off the truth. "I daresay this clergyman is all wrong."

"He is a stranger here, Fräulein. Perhaps he will stay," the girl said, shaming the elder lady by her thought for others at such a time. "He was—very kind; but I cannot see him again. He tried—to comfort me. He was a stranger in that church to-day, for it was the vicar's funeral. He lives in—in another village, I—forget. He would not write. That was kind. He said he feared such sorrow for a wife, so suddenly and awfully widowed—*widowed!* Oh, mother!"

The utterance of the mother's name snapped the brave, unnatural tension of self-restraint, and with that piteous cry the girl fell forward, knowing nothing more; though tightly still she held the gloves within both hands.

CHAPTER V.

"YOUR OWN SON."

MRS. BURTLE, sitting next afternoon in her inner drawing-room in Onslow Square, glanced up—with astonishment too spontaneous to be concealed, as she would have wished to conceal it—when her servant announced "Miss Hurst."

"It is several years," she observed, languidly offering her fingers to Theo, "since you favoured me with a visit. To what do I owe this?"

"To a great sorrow," the girl answered, absently. She had looked slowly round the two pretty rooms, as if they were strange to her, though often as a child she had chafed in the thralldom here, hating the pretty satin chairs with their lace pinafores and bows, because they always stood in the same spots; and wishing one of the plates upon the wall would fall, that there might be

some change. But she had not looked into the old lady's pale set face, nor even glanced at Angel Sullivan, who, sitting apart a little, was manufacturing a duplicate of the laces on the sofa.

"Sit down."

Mrs. Burtle's stern, hard voice broke the minute's silence abruptly, but Theo did not obey, until Angel came and, with a kiss, drew her down upon the sofa.

"How did you come here?" inquired her grandmother, gazing fixedly through her glasses at the girl in this new aspect, pale and shrinking, with as little of the old spirit in her manner as of the old prettiness and brightness in her black dress.

"In a cab."

"And is it waiting for you?"

"Yes."

"Then don't forget you will have to pay for every minute you keep it. Why did you come alone?"

"Miss Wedeker was very kind, and offered to come, but one of us ought to be at home, and I wished to speak to you—alone."

"An unusual honour."

"No," said the girl, gently, "I used to come. It was you who stopped me. That makes it more painful now, but—whom else have I?"

"Well?" queried Mrs. Burtle, ignoring the piteous question.

"Yesterday I simply sent you word," Theo said, glancing at the closed blinds, "that my father was dead. I am come myself to tell you how he died."

"No need," was the cold answer. "Fraulein Wedeker has written to me. She seemed to think it would be cruel to let you tell, though I think the misery and disgrace are chiefly mine."

"Then you know we are ruined?" the girl asked, drawing a long breath, and pushing the hair from her white, suffering face.

"I know it; I had guessed it before."

"Guessed? Oh, is it possible, yet had not warned my father."

"Much he would have heeded my warning. Years ago I prognosticated his ruin, but he never heeded me."

"You never helped him in any way," said Theo, controlling her voice by a great effort. "I know that you have never given him—and that he never asked for—a single shilling from his father's wealth, even when——"

"There, don't speak of that. He offended me on my second marriage, and since that time I have not cared to speak either to him or of him."

"But will you help my mother?"

"What claim has she upon me, pray?" inquired the old lady, coolly meeting the sad eyes which sleeplessness had made so wide and feverish.

"She has never asserted any, but I must plead for her, as she would never plead for herself—though she would for me. She is your son's widow, and I am your son's child. Will you help us in our need, before she knows the soreness of this need? Will you help us to go away from here? I know you do not care for us, but, even if we were nothing to you, you might from your abundance give the little I ask. Just to begin our life—humbly—elsewhere. She does not know all this misery yet, and I dare not tell her until I have some hope for her. May I tell you what I beg? The kind clergyman who came to—to tell us, has been with Fräulein this morning very patiently, and he is very sorry for us. He told her—perhaps she had been saying I would teach and earn all I could for mother—that he wanted his two little girls taught by a lady who would live in his village, and play the organ in his church, and that there was a cottage vacant, and we should have it and he would wait for the rent, if we would bring furniture and what was necessary to make it home. Oh, how thankfully I accepted! And I thought you would perhaps, lend me the money—only lend it, for I will repay it, saving from what I earn. Will you do this? Will you?"—with strong self-control—"let me have a few pounds? Fräulein says one hundred will do, but I say less will. Only for a time. My father would have thought so little of giving that, and you are richer——"

"I know both my own affairs and his," was the cold, clear interruption. "I need no childish information. Why don't you go home and choose what furniture you need from the quantity you have?"

"From *that*," cried the girl, with such a strange, new ring in her voice that Angel Sullivan turned aside to hide her shaking lips and fingers. "Would I touch what my father left, when it belongs to—to those to whom he owes? Oh, cannot you understand?"

"Are there bailiffs in your house, then?" asked Mrs. Burtle, icily! but one glance into the girl's flashing eyes made her turn her own question coolly aside. "You have made numberless friends, all of you, by your extravagance, surely they will help you now."

"Is there one whom I could ask if you refuse?" inquired Theo, pressing her lips upon her teeth to still them, "If we have no claim on you, on whom can we have it? All you possess might have been my father's. Oh, give us that trifle that I ask. No, not give, only lend. If you think less will do,

give me less. You will know. I only want just to make a home for mother away from here; away in the quiet country—the only home we can ever have again. I can work, and I will save and pay you every farthing.”

“You are well trained to save, I expect,” was the chill remark. “Your father was one to save, was not he? Don’t interrupt. From his possessions, surely you can take what you want for the house you speak of. It would hardly be missed, and the rest will only go to men who are as much to blame as he was, and helped him in fraud and——”

“Oh, hush,” the girl cried, tortured beyond bearing, rising with her hand before her eyes; and, as she rose, Angel Sullivan rose too, and left the room.

“I will ‘hush’ effectually,” was the stern reply. I have nothing more to say.”

“Will you forgive me for my impatience?” Theo said, dropping her hand, and pleading humbly once again; because it was for her mother, and she could supplicate for her as she had never dreamed of doing; “and will you help me for—my mother’s sake?”

“It was ill-timed of your mother to send you to me to-day.”

“She send me!” Theo cried, her eyes brilliant in their flash of anger. “She would never—but,” she added, correcting herself sorrowfully and proudly, “you knew that was not true. She does not know yet what—what anguish—she has to bear. I must tell her, but I hoped to tell her then where we could go, she and I, and be at rest. She must not come to the old home again. I hoped you would help me that there should be another for her.”

“All you wish lies in your power,” Mrs. Burtle said, looking towards the window while she spoke, as if she felt the interview had been quite long enough. “Your conscientious scruples are exaggerated.”

So fully aware was she of the girl’s grave, wondering look into her face that presently she turned to meet it; and then uncomfortably, and almost nervously, she laughed. “How ridiculously unlike your father’s family you are, child!”

But Theo, who had heard the laugh, heard nothing more. As if the sound stabbed her, she had turned and left the room, groping her way downstairs, forgetting everything but what she had to tell her mother. She had forgotten that a cab was waiting for her; she had forgotten Angel Sullivan’s very existence, and was looking dazedly before her, as she came down the last step, when some one, with a gentle, close caress, drew her into a gloomy, darkened room, and closed the door.

“Theo dear,” cried Angel, in clear, loving tones, “did you

think I would let you go without kissing me? Kiss me, dear, again and again. It will do us both good. There! Now let me look at you. My poor, pale little girl, you must try to sleep to-night, and you must eat. I couldn't rest up there. I could have torn the lace I held to atoms. I could have broken all the Venetian glass and china wonders that the room held, however rare. And I could have cried aloud for my own home, though we have no china but the tea-things, and nothing Venetian but the blinds. Oh, Theo, smile, my dear, just once. You will have that cottage, and you will be so much, much happier than I can be, though I do try to do my duty, Theo, as I said. Listen, dear." Angel was on her knees beside her cousin, and as she chatted on and on to rouse her, now and then kissing her, now and then hastily wiping a tear from her own eyes, she was gently pressing a little parcel into Theo's hands. "Never in all my life was I so glad of anything as that I had this money, dear. Never! But I've spent so much. I've spent two pounds and fourteen shillings, and, Theo, I hate myself, for breaking into it. It was so stupid, and so unnecessary. I never wanted it. Never. Oh, my dear, you know that very well. I hate it. It has been a misery to me for three whole days. I could never have spent it myself. It isn't worth having now, though, because I've spent so much of it. I can't think why I did. What did I want with anything that cost two pounds and fourteen shillings? I should have been happier without it."

"Angel," faltered Theo, trying to follow clearly all this kind, sweet nonsense, "I could not. You don't think I could—take your——"

"If you don't," said Angel, very sternly, "I shall tear every note to atoms, and shall know you never cared for me—we who were children together and loved each other! I will tear every note, if you don't take them now. Why, Theo, my dear, you may pay me back. It is no gift, only a little loan. I lend you what I don't want, and some day when I am really wanting it—needing it—in you will come and bring it me. And think how much it would be worth to me just then! Oh, twice as much as now! It is nothing to me now. No more than it would be to Aunt Burtle. No more at all."

"Oh, Angel, you say so because you are generous, but I know what this seventy pounds has been to you."

"I only wish it were seventy pounds," sighed Angel, trying not to look into her cousin's troubled face. "But you see I've spent two pounds and fourteen shillings. Such a baby I was when I didn't want anything. I'm only asking you to keep it for me, Theo, just at present, that is all. Think of it that way, dear,

and how I can come and claim all your furniture whenever I like, in that happy little home of yours; and that it will be as good for me as for you to feel that you two are happy there, you and — Oh, my dear, my dear, don't try to stop the tears. They are good for you. They have done me good, too. Don't start, dear. It is only one of the servants bringing a cup of tea I ordered. Only one cup between us. Now, you drink first, or else I cannot. There! it is rather nice, isn't it? How good it is to see you smile, ever so faintly! Theo, if you only knew it, you have been more kind to me to-day than I have been to you."

"And some day," said the younger girl, with strange, pathetic gravity, "perhaps I may be able to show you—never to tell you—how I would do for you as much as you have done for me to-day."

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER TWO YEARS.

AFTER a long hour's practice, Theo locked the organ, passed through the shadowy church, and out into the churchyard, pausing there to gaze on the beauty of the September sunset above the hills afar off. As she stood so, the rector came from the school-house opposite and joined her, with an absent look upon his face which gave her a quick pain she understood well—a selfish pain, against which she had fought many a time before to-day.

"I hope you are coming home with me, Mr. Sterne," she said, the words prompt and cheerful. "It is a lonely walk to the cottage."

"It must be a very familiar one to you now, Miss Theo," the rector answered, neither leaving her nor turning with her. "I often fear you—you both think I have let it become too familiar to me too."

"We could never think that, and we never shall," said Theo, frankly. "I sent the children on to mother when I went in to practise, and I know she will expect you to fetch them home. They love to spend their holiday afternoons with mother."

"I am so afraid of her growing weary of my little girls," he said, a slow flush rising to the roots of his thick, grey hair. "But they are so fond of—you and of her that it is hard to keep them away."

"Please don't try," entreated Theo. "I often tell mother I am tempted to be jealous of—her two youngest children" (Theo's pause was scarcely perceptible, but the smile was) "and of course they would love her. Who would not?"

"Who indeed? Do you ever notice how the people speak of her? I suppose not, as they can scarcely separate your name from hers. Miss Theo, nothing ever struck me so deeply as your love for your mother first did on that miserable night after I had been burying my brother clergyman twenty miles away. How much I owe to that sad day! Sweeter friendship than I had ever known; and friends and teaching for my children which will mould all their lives as I have wished."

"You know I cannot teach," cried Theo, lightly interrupting. "I'm sure you used to see how tremblingly I began every day's work. I often felt I would give all I possessed to have passed an examination like other teachers."

"Which you have not," smiled the rector, with no overpowering regret in his tone. "They are splendid institutions for the brain, but I don't find they do much for the heart; and I had a fancy that in my children's education sympathy should have a place as well as reasoning."

"It is all well if you are content; but mother has done more for their real education than I could do."

"I am much more than content," he said, and then was silent, offering Theo his hand.

"No, I shall not bid good-bye," she said. "You will come for May and Elsie? I shall keep them till you do, and if I did not, mother would." Then, purposely avoiding his reply, she walked homewards slowly, not calling to-day in the scattered cottages she passed, where she knew how glad a greeting awaited her, and her mother's name would be uttered with a blessing.

The golden light had faded when she reached the cottage which had become to mother and daughter so dear and so pretty a little home; and in the sweet September twilight her mother came out to meet her, with the rector's little girls. When the lengthy cheerful tea was over, Theo merrily sent the children away. "Tell Joan we want the kitchen for a game of Hot Boiled Beans, and you wait and help her to prepare it. Run, or papa will be here for you before we have had it. You sit and rest, mother," she continued, when the children had left them together, "though I verily believe you enjoy a game as much as they do. Do you know, I believe"—Theo had come round to her mother's chair, and was kneeling by her with a strange, wistful tenderness on her lifted face—"that you are sorry your one girl has grown up. You like them best little."

"My dear!"

"Mother, when I met Mr. Sterne to-day, he had not intended to come here this evening."

"No, dear?"

"No. He does not seem happy, mother; quite different from what he used to be."

Silence being Theo's only reply, she broke it a little nervously.

"You know why, mother?"

"I?"

"Ah! yes. You cannot disguise anything from me. It is impossible, for I love you far too well. We never *could* disguise anything from one another; nor," the girl added, steadily in her happy ignorance, "shall we ever. Mother, why have you not been out to-day, you look as tired as you used to look when you walked so much?"

"I do so little good, dear."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" inquired Theo, brightly. "And any harm? Mother, how old were you when you were married?"

"How old?" Mrs. Hurst echoed, in wondering surprise at this irrelevancy. "Only seventeen, dear, but I always feel ashamed to confess it to you."

"Just two years younger than I am," mused Theo. "You left your mother then; and do you know how pretty and young you are, even now that your eldest daughter is nineteen?"

"My eldest daughter, Theo? What others have I?"

"Eldest," with a laugh, "since you adopted two others."

"My dear, they are pupils, that is all, and—motherless."

"But," said the girl, steadily, yet with unconscious pathos, "not fatherless. Their father," she went on, presently, "has been a good friend to us. Could we ever have known a truer and better? I like him very, very much, and I'm proud of him too. He has such a pleasant, earnest face, and is quite young, for all his thick, grey curls. Mother—" Theo laid her cheek against her mother's, and whispered softly,—"it hurts me so that you should refuse him what he asks you, just for my sake. There is no other reason, and I want to tell you now that you are mistaken. You stay with me here, though you know how you are wanted elsewhere, and how good it would be for many people if you went—Oh, what a pretty blush, my mother! Now try to think of it in my way—don't interrupt. I know very well how you have been looking at it before, and refusing to discuss it even with yourself, because I daresay you fancied I was so happy here with you, and so snug, that I should miss your entire companionship; while the truth is—" with a little catching in her breath, bravely suppressed— "I should have that

at the rectory, and the companionship of others too, and a delightful home, for I know Mr. Sterne wishes for me there, as well as for you. Between you and me, my dear, I seriously think his *chief* desire is to have—me in the rectory. Now do you see how you ought to be weighing this little matter, you most selfish of mothers? We are very poor after all, are we?"

"And yet," put in the mother, her eyes filling with tears, "when you sent Angel the last instalment of what we owed her, you said nothing would ever make you again feel anything but rich."

"But *you* did not say so," replied Theo, readily. "Oh, mother, were we not glad to send that to Angel? But I shall never feel she is repaid. She could not be, we owe so much to her."

"She said she was more than repaid."

"See how you wander from the subject," smiled Theo, fighting with the tears which were so rare with her. "I was saying we are very poor, mother, in reality, and I am such an inefficient teacher that I cannot go on teaching long, because my deficiencies will be found out. And—and as there's nobody to marry me, my mother, you will—you must—let some one marry you. Why, your cheek is as hot as if you were blushing. You love the place; you are as fond of May and Elsie as if they were my own sisters—well, almost; you would still have me, and you know what a heart you have won. You will make our rector very happy; the children frantic with delight, and me content. Oh, mother," cried the girl, forgetting the tears in her own eyes, "why do you cry? It is the desire of his heart, and the longing of yours, though you have tried your best to believe otherwise."

"I have tried," said Mrs. Hurst, very low, "because I feared you would be unhappy. I have tried to stifle my own thoughts whenever they touched this; yet I could not always. Sometimes they were too strong for me because I knew you need not teach *then*, and would be always with me; and I felt how his love and care—such care as from a husband I was unused to even—"

"Hush, mother! Don't say it. It is natural, but don't say it. Yes, his love is well worth winning, dear. A blessing indeed."

"Theo," the mother whispered, humbly, "he has told me that it was your love for me which made him first think—think differently of me from——"

"From anyone else? I know, dear, and he has often told you of it. Oh, I guessed. That's his knock. Now I'm going for my game with the children. Kiss me, dearest. In half an hour there

will be no one so happy in Little Darben as—— Did you think I was going to say as you? Nonsense! As Lewis Sterne. Oh, dear, he ought to have been Laurence, oughtn't he? Why do you look at me so? I feel as glad as glad can be, my mother. Now for our game of Hot Boiled Beans!"

CHAPTER VII.

TO BRIGHTON.

Two more years have sped in Little Darben, and once more it is a September day. At the lawn gate of the pretty ivy-covered rectory, the rector stands, and the baby boy upon his shoulder clutches, with tiny, gentle fingers, the thick curly hair which has grown no greyer and no thinner through these two bright happy years.

"Now watch for mother," whispers Mr. Sterne, looking up into the child's face with a depth of tenderness which the little one cannot understand; and just then Theo comes down the garden, the two little girls with her. She is more beautiful at twenty-one than she was in her girlhood; the rose tint still more lovely in her dark, small face; the light still more lustrous in her large, dusky eyes; her teeth shining white as snow in the swift, brilliant smile that is less rare now. She always says, laughingly, that her baby-brother rules the house, its inmates being all his slaves, and his weakest cry powerful as the voice of Jove; but all the others are vaguely conscious that it is she who is the life and spirit of the household. The gentle mother, the loving, generous father, the happy, light-hearted girls, the cherished boy, all lean unconsciously upon the bright, quick, self-forgetting girl, who turns all their little worries into merriment; laughs away their fancied troubles; soothes their real ones, and doubles all their pleasures, both by her own hearty love of pleasure for its own sake, and her deep, true love for them.

"Run in, May," she says, with the old childish excitement, "and ask Jane to bring the tea out here, before mother comes. Fly, Elsie, and coax cook for all the fruit she has." And then she ran away, and the rector darted after her, the boy still on his shoulder, laughing delightedly as his father raced about the garden with him, skilfully waylaying Theo.

"Oh, stop!" she cried, at last, laughing and out of breath, her hat gone, her hair blown about her forehead, and a roseleaf

colour in her soft, round cheeks. "Two to one is quite unfair. Ah, I hear a step, papa, don't you?"

"There she is!" cried the rector, with almost boyish glee. "She promised only to sit with Dan for an hour. Call, mother, baby."

"Mother!" shrieks the baby voice, and Theo, leaning against the open gate, smiles to see them go out into the road. "How they miss mother, even for an hour!" she whispers softly to herself; then watches her mother coming in at her husband's side, one hand lifted for her little boy to hold, and her eyes lifted, too, to his face and his father's, beautiful as even Theo, who had so deeply loved her, had never seen her in the old life; with a beauty which even strikes the girl anew this afternoon.

And so it is that for the first few minutes, before she turns to arrange the tea table on the lawn, Theo does not notice some one else come up to the rectory gate and pause there. But when the others join her they have a stranger with them.

"Theo," the rector says, "Mr. Derham, Miss Hurst. Mr. Derham, on his way to the north, has brought a letter and messages from Mrs. Burtle; but, beyond that, we will welcome him for his own sake, not only because he is a friend of your grandmother's, but because he is also the younger brother of a dear old college friend of mine. You always have an extra cup laid for a chance guest, don't you, Theo?"

"Yes," said Theo, with a ready handshake for this guest who brought a double introduction; "but unfortunately we don't always have the guest, papa. Oh, Mr. Derham, let me advise you, please, not to appropriate that rustic seat. One leg always gives way at a crisis, and as it is planted just opposite me I shall drop the teapot when you collapse."

"Then may I share that unnecessarily long seat of yours, Miss Hurst?"

"No one ever does," asserted Theo, gravely. "Whoever sat at that end would go down instantly, while I bounded up in the air."

Laughingly he took one of the comfortable little chairs that had been brought out; and the others, while they laughed, did not notice that he had set it where he had first planted the unsteady one—exactly opposite Theo. She was very busy now, and except that she listened with pleasant interest to all that was said, took no share in the conversation. But when there came a pause in her duties, and the little girls had finished tea and been sent indoors, she leaned back in her corner of the old garden settle, and under her long, dark lashes gave the stranger's face a slow, deliberate investigation. Suddenly, in the midst of her scruti-

nising, his gaze met hers, and she turned her eyes with that unnatural movement of the lids inevitable under those awkward circumstances; but she always knew that even those few moments had shown her a face she never could forget. Not an exceptionally handsome face, for it was too thin (almost worn-looking) for so young a man—a man of thirty at most; and the drooping moustache and curly hair were “fair,” Theo thought, slightly, “as a girl’s;” while the nose was long. But it was a face with a strange power and attraction, and a real beauty, too, in the long and rather deep-set grey eyes.

“Miss Sullivan did not know I was coming until it was too late to write, Miss Hurst,” he observed, as if to coolly bring back Theo’s gaze; “so that she had only messages to send by me. I will give them to you by degrees.”

“That is far more sensible than sending letters by hand,” returned Theo, with a glance at the letter her mother held.

“But she begged me,” the young man went on, “to second her aunt’s request for her, and plead with you to go to Brighton.”

“I to go!” cried Theo. “Is that what the letter asks, mother?”

It was indeed what Mrs. Burtle had written to demand, and for quite an hour the little party sat down in the slanting sunlight, discussing this plan; while it seemed to them as if this new friend must have been always their friend, as he joined in all the discussion, clearly, quietly, and with a wonderful familiarity with all its bearings. Theo’s grandmother wished the girl to come to her at once. She was to be her co-heiress with Angel Sullivan, Mrs. Burtle said, and she wished her to be a companion for Angel, and to take her share in cheering and helping her father’s mother. “She always pretended to love her cousin” (so the letter brusquely concluded); “let her prove it now by coming to make her life more cheerful with young companionship. I don’t forget she is my son’s child, and Angel only my nephew’s, but what I have done for Angel she has been grateful for, while what I intend to do for Theo shall win her services in advance.”

“I could not possibly accept anything from her,” said Theo, quickly, after the letter had been read. “She would not let me when I would have given her a life-long gratitude.”

“She is old and infirm,” observed Mr. Derham, with a strange, steady glance from his beautiful eyes. “She has made you Miss Sullivan’s co-heiress already, so what you give her will not be for any special reward—unless there is a reward in feeling one has brightened any loneliness, and Miss Sullivan has rather a lonely life.”

“Mother,” said Theo, that night, very quietly, “If you say so I will go. I see it is right. I cannot be missed here—well, for

long let me say ; and perhaps I grow too idle and too happy at home."

"That is so possible to you, dear," the mother answered, laughing, though there were tears in her eyes. "But, Theo, we have a reason—Lewis and I—why we wish you to go, even beyond your grandmother's motives. You see so few people here, and it is scarcely fair to you, my child, with your beauty and——"

The words were stopped by a long kiss. "Any reason will do, mother dear, if only you wish it. I can be spared—Oh, I know what you are going to say, but you are complete, you dear little family, here, and I shall come back."

"Angel deserves a young companion," Mrs. Sterne said, "though I always feel she is happily enjoying what luxury your grandmother's life gives her ; prettily and cheerfully appreciating a hundred indolent occupations that you would call wearisome. But she deserves to have you now. It will be good for you both, dear love, to have each other."

"And you," laughed Theo, a little hysterically, "will have each other here. So it is all arranged, is it ? And—when am I to go, mother ?"

"With Mr. Derham. He goes on to Edinburgh to-morrow, and returns in a few days, when you will travel with him to Brighton. Your grandmother speaks most highly of him, and begs you will go in his charge. Do you like him, dear ?"

"I think so."

"What a grave tone ! Do not be grieved to go, dear. It is we who shall feel the parting most, yet I shall be glad afterwards, I think. And I like Mr. Derham so much. I think now that in the first moment I saw him I felt a strange trust in him, and that feeling has increased all the evening. I am glad he stayed to dine, and that we sent for his bag, and kept him here. I never saw a man with just that way and manner before ; such a quiet easy force there seems about him ; ready and yet thoughtful ; so free and yet so perfectly courteous. Lewis says that the elder brother told him once that Rex was 'a power in Oxford,' and really I can believe it as I look at him, even before I listen. Can you ?"

"Yes ; I can believe it."

"How bright you look, dear ; not a bit as if this stranger had kept us up to unconscionable hours. Well, a change does all young people good, and except for the parting I am delighted to feel that you will be in Brighton this autumn."

Mr. Derham did not travel on to Edinburgh next day, though no one quite understood why. He chose to idle it away in Little

Darben; but in such a manner that by the following morning, when he really went northward, he had established a secure friendship with the rector's household. With the rector himself, who much enjoyed chatting over Oxford days with a man whose opinions were fresh and thoughtful, and whose culture was deeper than his own. With Mrs. Sterne, to whom, while always courteous and attentive, he gave pleasant descriptions of the life her daughter would lead in Brighton; talked of Miss Sullivan's longing for her cousin; and (with perfect generosity, though frank indifference) of Mrs. Burtle's whims and ways. With the little girls who owed a holiday to him, and were happily aware of a pleasant presence in the house. With the baby boy who found a good playfellow, though one who would not bow down to the tiny ruler. With Theo herself, who, without wishing to understand why, felt the sunshine had never been so bright before that day; and that all her life had held no such wonderful sunset as that evening's, when, at the rector's instigation, she took this stranger to see it from the hilly churchyard, where alone she had so often paused in its beauty; and that no summer twilight had ever been so calm and lovely as this September evening's, in the sweet, wild, wanton garden round the old rectory home. She knew this stranger did not seem to seek her, or follow her, yet she knew (as a woman can know) that he was always conscious of her presence; always aware when her glance fell upon him; that he heard every word of hers; and was always alive to her every want or suggestion. Next day he went northward, but the "few days" he had spoken of being away, dissolved into four-and-twenty hours; and in the afternoon of the following day he returned to Little Darben to await Theo.

"I was so sure you would be ready and longing to start," he said, addressing her so lightly that she laughed at herself for having fancied he had coloured when they had met so suddenly (so, of course, unexpectedly on her part) at the churchyard gate, when she came from the choir practice that afternoon.

"I am in no haste," she said. "I hope you do not wish to go on to-day."

"Will you think me selfish if I say you may pack as slowly as you like, because Mr. Sterne has invited me to stay at the rectory until you leave with me?"

So until the fourth day the departure was postponed, from hour to hour, everyone in the rectory dreading to part with Theo, and no hindrance being offered from the only one who was supposed to expedite it. Even then, to more than one, those days had flown by with strange swiftness.

"I should feel it so different, dear, if you were going alone,"

the mother said, when the farewell came at last. And Theo knew afterwards how different it had been, for (sorrowful as it was to leave the dear ones and the happy home) her thoughts were pleasantly and skilfully turned from it during the journey, and when Angel Sullivan met her cousin at the Brighton Station, and asked if the journey had not seemed very long, Theo looked wonderingly up at the clock.

"Nearly five," she said, "and we left at ten. Of course seven hours are very long."

"Miss Sullivan asked you what it seemed, not what it was," put in Mr. Derham, as he walked beside the girls to the waiting carriage.

"There is no clock to remind me what it seemed," she answered, lightly, "only what it was."

"Rex, you are coming with us, of course," cried Angel, in surprise, when he stepped back from the carriage door. "Aunt Burtle will scold me if I don't bring you to dinner."

"I will follow you," he said, lifting his hat.

"That is his thoughtfulness," remarked Angel, with a little effort at unconcern. "He knows I want you all to myself for a little bit."

"I want you for a large bit," laughed Theo. And so the talk drifted into loving nonsense, and they both remembered afterwards that Rex Derham's name had not been mentioned, until, after a formal greeting, Mrs. Burtle dismissed Theo.

"Now go and dress. Mr. Derham dines with us at seven. Have you any respectable things to wear here? Remember Brighton just now is not like that village you've been living in."

"I generally looked respectable there," returned Theo, as she rose to go. "I have made my own dresses for years, and grown experienced."

"Couldn't you pay a dressmaker?" queried the old lady.

"Would I, do you think, while I owed money to my cousin? After that I had won the experience, and liked the practice, though my stepfather is so generous to me. But I have one dress I did not make; a present from him."

"Well, go away now, and put on the least ugly thing you have."

Half an hour afterwards, Theo went up to her grandmother's chair, and exhibited herself, in her frank, fearless way.

"Will this dress do?"

It was only a gown of Indian muslin, pale golden in its shade, and Theo had made it, and trimmed it with softly falling lace; but Mrs. Burtle, keenly examining it, concluded this was the one dress the girl had received perfect from the dressmaker's hands.

She fixed her eyes rigidly on the beautiful crimson rose Theo had fastened at her throat, and successfully hid her overweening satisfaction in her granddaughter's striking and unusual beauty.

"It will do," she answered, curtly. "Buried as you have been, who taught you what would suit you?"

"We have not quite been buried," laughed Theo, turning the question aside, because Mr. Derham had come in, and seemed even himself to be waiting for her answer.

Whatever such a lengthy dinner might have seemed to the girls, if they had been alone with Mrs. Burtle, it was a pleasant, cheerful meal to them to-night, and neither questioned why it was so.

"As a rule, when you have no engagement for the evenings, you girls may walk on the pier after dinner," the old lady observed, as she rose to leave the dining-room. "I mean when Mr. Derham can escort you, or Hardy can be spared." (Hardy was Mrs. Burtle's very confidential, middle-aged maid.) "But I suppose you are tired to-night, Theo."

"No, indeed," said Theo, with suspicious haste. "I am never tired by the sea."

"Then go. You have no fashionable wrap, I daresay, and it will be chilly on the pier, so ask Hardy for my sable cloak. If you are good, I shall get you sealskins like Angel's."

"I have everything I need, thank you," said Theo, with a vivid blush. "Please let that be understood between us. I hoped you invited me because you had affection to offer me—not charity."

"We hear of another sort of charity, Miss Hurst," said Rex, softly, before he followed from the room, "that thinketh no evil."

For an instant the girl's eyes met his, brilliant in their anger; then suddenly they softened with a strange wistfulness, and fell before the steadfast grey ones.

"Angel," said Theo, when the little party were leaving the house in the dusk (Hardy pausing in the background), "please lead the way, you and Mr. Derham. I want to walk with Hardy, and pick up information."

"Why, Theo," whispered Angel, astonished, "Mrs. Burtle never intends that."

"But I do. Please lead the way."

Laughing at her cousin's whim, Miss Sullivan walked on at Mr. Derham's side, and Theo's gaze followed the two figures—the man's well-knit and tall, the girl's looking less small than usual in the long sealskin which nearly covered her evening dress.

Mrs. Hardy had enlightened her companion on the subject of her parentage, her rheumatism, her temperate habits, and her

reason for choosing an honourable career of useful dependence, before they paused at the gateway of the pier for Hardy to show their tickets, and just within Angel and Mr. Derham stood waiting. But presently Mrs. Hardy, in all innocence, separated them as they all walked in a line. She would like a chair, if she might be excused, she said, for Miss Sullivan was so swift a walker.

"Let us go and secure a chair you like," said Mr. Derham, courteously. "I will come back to the young ladies."

"Oh, Angel, how pleasant it is!" cried Theo, when they were alone, her voice stirred by the intensity of a new, unfeigned enjoyment. "I'm so glad we are here together. It makes me feel so happy and so young. I feel like a girl, not a bit as if I were twenty-one."

"Terrific age," laughed Angel. "Was Hardy very eloquent on her rheumatism?"

"Yes, she accurately described what she called her last severe attachment."

"We laughed to think how you would be edified on your walk. She is invaluable to Aunt Burtle because of her nursing powers, but unfortunately she can nearly always be spared to us. Isn't that pink a pretty costume? I must initiate you into the new materials and styles."

"Do," said Theo, looking among the crowd with radiant happy eyes that won her many an unnoticed gaze, while her heart seemed dancing within her. "Is it the sea air, Angel, or these airs from 'Pinafore,' or is it the scene—so strange to me—that makes me feel so light of heart? Can you possibly be *accustomed* to such a feeling?"

"Just notice the height of those heels," whispered Miss Sullivan. "They actually look dangerous. Aunt Burtle calls it the harrowing preparatory to a fine corn harvest— Oh, she is as bitter as ever. She says she shall send me home instantaneously if she ever sees me pinch in my waist. Just look at that one, isn't it marvellously small? You aren't looking, Theo. Why, you are actually watching Hardy. Your face to-night reminds me so of what Captain Leslie said about you on that night I saw him last. Do you often hear from him?"

"Never," said Theo, quietly. "Mother does."

"Fancy! Rex met him in Bombay. Rex travels very much, for, though he is a barrister, he has a fortune of his own as well."

"How strange for him to know Jack!" said Theo, conscious of an approaching figure.

"Yes; he told me so—not this evening, he was far too long in telling me of his first arrival at your home when he saw you making tea on the lawn."

"I saw her long before she made the tea," put in Mr. Derham, joining them at that moment. "I had my opportunity before she thought of me. Do you know, Angel," he continued, laughing, "your cousin had a cup awaiting me, and a seat all ready. What do you think now of magnetic attraction?"

"You have a vivid remembrance of that tea," said Angel, merrily. "Do you remember it as distinctly, Theo?"

"That is not possible," Rex Derham said, with curious quietness.

"I remember it still more distinctly," Theo answered, the gas lights on the pier being insufficient to betray her warm, swift blush. "I remember a stranger appropriating the stray cup we always provided for a passing friend, and I remember that he had the cup filled many times. In fact,

"A long, long draught, an outstretched hand,
And crackers, toast, and tea;
They vanished from that stranger's touch,
Like dew upon the sea.'"

Amid her laughter, Miss Sullivan gave a timid glance up in the young man's face, anxious to see the effect upon him of this audacity. But his answering glance assured her very rapidly, and, after that, all through the long pleasant hour they spent upon the pier, she had as little fear of Theo vexing him, as if she could have seen the desire in the girl's heart.

"You don't look a bit tired, Theo. Have you enjoyed yourself so much?" she asked, with no uncertainty as to the reply, when she lingered in Theo's room that night.

"Oh, Angel, you know I did," Theo answered, pushing the soft thick hair from her temples, wondering vaguely when it was that the hours first began to hold so much. "You know I did. You saw how ridiculously I betrayed my delight in it all. Yet I scarcely know what it was. The band, the lights, the people—why, if to-morrow I were going away from it all for ever, instead of having just come, it could not more strangely and happily dwell with me. You understand? I have been wondering a good deal for the last few—lately, why it is that in great happiness all the words that we hear and say, even all the thoughts we think, grow—indelible."

"You will have your memory thickly stored, then," Angel said, laughing, "for you will have better days than this, dear."

"Shall I?"

"I should think so indeed, when you can only enumerate the lights, and music, and people, not even mentioning Rex and me."

"Or Hardy," added Theo, gravely.

"And that reminds me, Theo, I never asked you how you

like Mr. Derham. Of course you do very much. I never really feared you would not, though I was anxious."

"*Anxious*" echoed Theo, as she stood opposite her cousin, her hands linked before her. "Why?"

"Because I like him so very much; and he——"

"Yes, Angel?"

"And he likes me."

"Who would not? But—do you mean——"

"Don't ask me," cried Angel, throwing her arms suddenly round her cousin's neck, and hiding her face against Theo's. "I hope so. I think so. Aunt Burtle thinks so; Hardy is sure so; and I——Oh, Theo, is it unwomanly of me, before he speaks? But, if it is not so, I think—I think my heart will break."

"No," said Theo, softly; and folded her arms for one minute in a strange, strong way about her cousin "hearts do not—break—so easily."

CHAPTER VIII.

RENOUNCED !

If she could have gone home on that first night—so Theo often thought through the weeks that followed—there would have been nothing to bear of this nameless, indescribable pain, against which she fought every hour of every day.

If she could but go home! That was the girl's one longing now, and, paving the way for what she wished, she had told Angel, in Mr. Derham's presence, that she fancied she might soon be summoned home.

"I hope not," Rex Derham said, in his quiet, courteous way. "But it is a pleasant railway journey, and I rather want to take it again, and to see my brother's friend in Little Darben; so I will time my journey with yours, Miss Hurst, and will wait there until you are ready to return to Brighton."

Hearing this Theo tore up the pleading little letter she had written to her mother. It was far, far better to stay with Angel than that she should go away if he were to go too; far better, though here it was so hard to escape him, and still harder to pass in his presence those long, trying hours through which she must be brave in her determination.

Keenly and painfully was she conscious how, in her presence, he would wait for her words, whoever answered him; how impossible it was for her to avoid his glance; how her wishes were anticipated and her presence sought. But through the pain there was this one

ray of brightness—Angel did not know. It was this resolute determination to leave Angel's way smooth and unclouded that made a solitary rest so precious to Theo. But, though four weeks of such a struggle was telling on her, what could they guess of this?—they two, the girl who loved her and looked up to her as possessing all the world envies, or the man who, in a simple, earnest, reverent way, was proud to feel that he could give her a strong, deep, tender love; an old and honoured name that he himself had dignified; and a home which she should choose. What could they know, because the girl's face wore that deep, grave thoughtfulness only in such times as this, while she sat alone, looking far over the sunlit sea? Even now, when they joined her, her smile was swift and warm and beautiful. She had been thinking, as she sat in the garden above the beach, opposite her grandmother's house, of her own village home, re-living, as she did, with a strange and sad persistency, those few last days before she had left it; but, when Angel's voice broke the thought, she only remembered that she owed that home to Angel, owed her mother's home to Angel, and so owed her all.

The Morison girls kept me so long," said Angel, that I feared I should not find you, Theo. But Rex soon spied you out."

"Even without Angel's scarlet sunshade," put in Mr. Derham. "I see them all over Brighton, like poppies in a wheatfield, yet I am never mistaken about Angel's. I believe she has a dexterous, underhand method of beckoning me with it. Where is yours? You are as fond of the wind as of the sun upon your face," said Rex, looking for the blush which Theo kept back by a stern, unnatural self-command—This childish determination not to blush at any words of his was always a difficulty to her—"We had full evidence of that at the Dyke yesterday. What a failure of a day it was! Why did you keep away from us all the time?"

"I found Hardy, and she was a beautiful companion. I had her up, and we climbed like birds. You would appreciate the simile if you had seen us."

"Or seen the birds. And I found you at last looking tenderly on while she refreshed herself with tea in that——"

"In the hotel," interposed Theo, correctively. "Hardy is what she calls totally *abstaineous*, yet so unfortunately constituted that a glass of water invariably makes her ill; so she has to fall back upon tea. I take tea too, whenever I can, and we have a hundred tastes in common. I need correction still, for she often tells me I take the bull by its wrong tail, but I think I'm improving, because yesterday she said I'd hit the nail on its right head. To-day we are going——"

"Where?" asked Rex, with eager quickness when she paused.

"We haven't decided, I remember," was the meditative reply; "but there will be a high east wind."

"Then I shall feel it necessary to go myself to hold Hardy up."

"Joking apart, Theo," interposed Angel, who never dreamed of seriousness in the words, "what plans shall we make for to-day? Aunt Burtle, having Mrs. Morison with her, leaves us all free. What do you say, Rex! Shall we ride? The other Morisons come to afternoon tea, and then there is Lady Willoughby's dance at the Pavilion, so a ride will fill up the whole day. Shall we go to Rottingdean?"

"I think that is a good arrangement," said Theo, conscious how Rex Derham waited for her answer. "Rottingdean is—eastward, is it not?"

"Yes."

That being apparently settled, they sat a little in silence, listening to the swish of the waves upon the beach, heard through the constant sounds of wheels behind, and the music of a band in Brunswick Square; and watching one little pleasure boat, with white and glistening sails, gliding lightly through a fleet of brown-sailed fishing boats.

"Miss Hurst," said Rex Derham, presently, "your cousin has kindly promised me two dances to-night—at the least, and I want to beg the same favour from you."

She had sat very still while he spoke, and even when he had ceased, almost as if she loved the sound of his voice, but when he repeated the question, she looked round as if surprised, and shook her head.

"I don't intend to dance. I have no wish to be laughed at by Brighton girls, because there was no dancing master in Little Darben."

"But you danced long ago," began Angel.

"Yes, like Mrs. Burtle. She danced long ago, but she would not now."

"You will wear roses," said Rex, after this absurd response. "You wear them every day."

"She has them by post," explained Angel, seeing nothing of the dusky colour which had risen in his bronzed face, before Theo's calm reply—

"My little sisters send them to me."

"They are your favourite flowers; you told me so once, and I remember."

"Ah! but those were home roses," she said, yet now, in spite of the negligent words, no wish of hers could prevent the rose tint deepening as she recalled how frankly she had talked to him

in the time he spoke of, among the roses in the rectory garden. How different it had all been then! And such a little time ago!

"Miss Theo," he said, with quiet earnestness—Angel had risen and strolled a few steps with an acquaintance who had spoken to her in passing—"there is nothing connected with those few days which I shall ever forget, while you seem to have utterly forgotten them. You have seemed even *anxious* to forget them. I wish the memory were not so much to me, because to you it is nothing."

"If you knew how I love Little Darben, you would never say its memory was nothing to me," observed Theo, delighted to see Angel approaching them again.

"Theo, the Elliots say it is quite a novelty to see you with us; that you are always now invisible, or driving primly with Aunt Burtle, or—remember it is their speech, not mine—lowering yourself to that ridiculous old Hardy. It really is noticed, you see, Theo."

"I would not call Hardy *it*," suggested Theo. "But I am rather glad she is noticed; I shall be noticed, too, if I cleave to her."

During this irrational remark, Rex Derham's eyes had been following a gentleman who had passed, and then they had turned searchingly to Theo; but she spoke before he had time to do so.

"That gentleman has passed us twice. He bowed to you the first time, Mr. Derham, though you did not see; but the second time he only looked at me."

"Cool!" muttered Rex, but did not explain for whom the adjective was intended. "Do you relish such openly-expressed admiration, Miss Hurst?" still looking at her wonderingly, for when he smiled he always caught himself questioning how he could have thought her most lovely in her gravity.

"How can I relish admiration *not* openly expressed?"

"And is he," Rex asked, with a little gesture towards the gentleman who had passed their seat, and a little disdain in his clear, high-bred tones, "the sort of person you—admire?"

"I think so. Let me recall him. He was young——"

"Pretty well," put in Rex.

"He was pretty well young, and I don't like men who are not pretty well young. He was dark, and I have a fellow-feeling. He had a black beard."

"And you like black beards?" interrogated Rex, in her weighty pause.

"So very much better than—blue ones. His hair was black as the raven's wing, and he had the rare and exquisite beauty of light eyes with dark hair and brows."

"How could you so quickly know that he had light eyes?"

"Have I not eyes myself?"

"Not light ones," laughed Angel.

"No, but there was light beyond them, and I could see. Now, Mr. Derham, I have recalled him to my satisfaction. Please tell me who he is."

"Of course, if you wish it." Neither of the girls guessed how hard the careless words were to Rex just then. "He is a Frenchman, with a very foreign accent."

"And is that all you know?" asked Theo, with a well-feigned sigh.

"Except that he has once or twice fallen into conversation with me."

"I wish he would fall into conversation with me."

"Angel always used to tell me," said Rex, in rather stiff tones, "how unlike you and she were, and Angel is right."

"Yes," said Theo, quietly, "Angel is always right. Indeed, you can scarcely understand how unlike we are. Angel is always good, while I—I don't intend always to be wrong," the girl said, with rather piteous simplicity, "but—you remember, Angel, how often Fräulein told me so—I let my own desires rule me, instead of the straightly defined path of—of truth and rectitude."

"Then they are your desires for others, never for yourself," said Angel, with a caressing touch upon the girl's folded hands. "Dear, don't always try to make Rex think so poorly of you."

"She could not succeed," he said, and for a moment she turned and met the steady, warm grey eyes. "She knows that is impossible."

"I wish," he added, unaware of the longing tenderness in his voice, "that you would speak to me as your cousin does, Miss Theo. For instance, do you dislike my baptismal name?"

"Who could like a name that rhymes with 'vex'?"

"We are forgetting lunch," said Angel, rising nervously, in the fear of Rex being hurt. "Come. We ought to be ready for our ride at two o'clock."

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE ALERT.

Nor the faintest trace of annoyance lingered in Rex Derham's mind when at two o'clock he rode from his hotel. But the expression of his face changed ominously when before Mrs. Burtle's door he saw only the sleek bay mare that Miss Sullivan rode, and no sign of the black filly always sent for Miss Hurst.

"Where is—the other horse?" he asked, but too thoroughly a

gentleman to betray any irritability when he saw Angel come alone into the hall to meet him, ready, and awaiting him.

"Rex, I am so sorry," she said, "but Theo has gone somewhere, and I found she had sent word that her horse would not be wanted, and told Evans to tell me she should not be home before tea."

"Where has she gone, and with whom?" inquired Rex, with a successful effort to speak unconcernedly.

"I don't know where," returned Angel, as she walked with him down the steps. "She went as if for a stroll, Evans said, and told Hardy to follow her westward. So strange that is, because she had liked the arrangement for Rottingdean, and seemed pleased to know that it was in the other direction. Mrs. Morison being here with Aunt Burtle leaves Hardy at perfect liberty, but still I cannot understand this last whim of Theo's."

"Did not she—" Mr. Derham was assisting Miss Sullivan to mount, and so did not look up as he spoke—"ask you to go?"

"Oh, no. Isn't it strange? Now I shall trust you, Rex, to bring us home punctually, that we may not keep the Morisons and Theo waiting."

Even more than to the letter did Rex obey her in this, and so gave himself half an hour to chafe restlessly in Mrs. Burtle's drawing-room, under her shrewd gaze, before the tea hour, when he felt so sure that Theo would come. But the hour struck, and only the two Miss Morisons and their brother arrived. Angel took her place before the table; Edgar Morison stood disburdening himself of well-ordered puns; and Angel's smile for him was kind and prompt. It was all wonderfully familiar, and many a time he had wished the little Dresden timepiece would creep through this happy hour. But he found it all different to-day.

"Mr. Derham has changed lately? Don't you think so, Angel?" asked Miss Morison, when he had left. "I think it is since your cousin came. I suppose he finds her rather in the way."

"I'm sure Rex does not feel it so," returned Angel, loyally; but after that she was a little less talkative; a little less appreciative of Edgar's puns. "How different one feels on different afternoons," she said to herself, as she went to her own room when her friends had left her, "and how hard little duties are sometimes!"

"Don't let this occur again, Theo. Always allow yourself plenty of time to dress."

"I did," said Theo, brightly, from her corner of the carriage.

"Nonsense! You owe it to me to be more considerate, and to try to look well."

"If I had spent three hours dressing, I could not look better than I do now," said Theo, simply, and unconscious that the words had a second and a truer meaning. But Angel saw, and laughed out merrily.

"That is quite true, Aunt Burtle, as you will see."

Mrs. Burtle saw indeed, and not only did her own eyes and judgment assure her that in all the brilliant little throng there was no one beautiful as her son's child; but even if she would have done, she could not have closed her ears to the remarks that Theo's striking and peculiar beauty elicited. She had determined to attend Lady Willoughby's dance in the gratifying conviction that she should chaperon two of the prettiest girls in the room to the most select assembly in Brighton, but she had no idea that one of them would at once be elected by all voices the beauty and attraction of the evening.

"What do they all admire in the child?" she asked, with feigned indifference, as she listened to the reiterated praises of her grand-daughter's beauty.

"Miss Hurst's prettiness is distracting," was one reply. "It is impossible to criticise it. It captivates one completely. What a smile she has, and what a face it is for mirroring every emotion! I catch myself watching her until I am ashamed, and yet I enjoy it. I believe her own enjoyment is infectious."

It was the thought of all who saw the girl. Her enjoyment was irresistible. It was only Angel who now and then uncomfortably fancied that a strange weariness (ignored, or rather defied) lay beneath the sweet yet daring merriment.

"Theo, are you trying to escape me?" she whispered once, when her cousin, after a swift glance, turned away from her.

"Even if I am," said Theo, gently, "we shall have each other afterwards," and then was gone.

"Oh, Rex,"—with a start, Angel had become aware that Theo must have been escaping Mr. Derham—"Theo could not stay. Somebody seems to be claiming her all the time. Is not she lovely to-night? I never saw her so sociable before. Indeed, years ago I used to think her very unsociable in company."

Angel was talking a little nervously. It was so humiliating to think that he might possibly have been aware of this childish avoidance of Theo's, he who had been so kind to her always. And it was depressing, too, to feel that Theo should shun Rex Derham. Why could they not agree better, these two dearest friends of hers?

But, if Theo were determined to avoid Rex, he was as firmly determined to thwart her design, and, his being the stronger will, and cooler courage, she found herself at last seated with him

near one of the low windows open to the lamplit grounds. Instinctively he had dreaded trusting himself to question her on her desertion from them that afternoon, yet after only a few minutes he was interrogating her with straightforward, un concealed anxiety.

"*Had* I promised to ride with Angel to Rottingdean?" pondered Theo, her lustrous eyes wandering everywhere, save to his face. "I think not."

"Then you never intended to go?"

"No, I never felt like going."

"May I ask——"

"Rottingdean is very dull," she went on, ignoring the interruption. "I went to a much more lively spot, the Swiss Gardens at Shoreham."

"You went there alone?" cried Rex, his bronzed face flushing with some emotion stronger even than anger.

"No, I went with Hardy."

"I mean with Hardy only."

"Do you? You said alone, Mr. Derham," she went on composedly, not even seeing how his teeth were closed upon his lips. "I suppose you have never been there. It is very pleasant."

"What on earth can tempt you to be so wildly independent!"

"There's a lake to row upon," resumed the girl, tranquilly, "and there are swings, and fortune-tellers, and seats, and tables, and refreshment rooms, and bands, and a real theatre, not to mention trees, and flowers, and birds—real ones. Are you interested?" innocently, "else I need not go on."

"You know I'm interested in every word you say, but it drives me wild to picture you there."

"You need not do so, because I am not there. I liked it all. I never heard heartier laughter than I heard in the little theatre there."

"Good heavens! Did you go into that theatre without——"

"Without you? Oh, yes," with inimitable coolness. "I don't think you would have managed any better for us than we managed for ourselves. I wanted to sit in the pit because there was no extra charge if we stayed through the concert and the play, but Hardy wouldn't. Mr. Derham,"—he had moved in his pained impatience, and, without any evident glance, she was aware of the troubled look upon his face—"it did me good. It was an audience of men and women, and servants and children, and their enjoyment in that little theatre was good to see. There were many things you would have been glad to notice. For instance, one song was sung by a girl in a page's dress, startlingly exaggerated—do you understand? The girl was pretty in her way, and

showily sang a kissing song, acting the refrain, and dancing between the verses, yet it fell dead and unapplauded. After that, a gaunt man, in very shabby black, with a pair of small, soiled gloves held in one large hand—two or three different people held these gloves suggestively during the play and the concert—sang ‘Tom Bowling’ in a quiet, grave, pathetic way, and was vociferously applauded and encored. I was so glad. I don’t think the song ever moved me so, even from Sims Reeves.”

“And yet,” said Rex, with a long look into her face, “you said you enjoyed it all.”

The colour deepened in her cheeks. Suppose he, who was so quick to read her thoughts, could read more than she meant him to do! The very fear of this gave her next words a gay defiance, which suited only too well the radiant eyes and laughing lips, misleading him.

“The crowd nearly killed Hardy, only I rescued her.”

“Theo, you drive me wild,” he cried, unthinking how he addressed her. “Why would you not take me?”

“Ladies don’t generally take gentlemen to theatres. Besides, how could I feel sure that you were, like the poet, ‘prepared to lay down your life for the British female’? Are you very anxious to hear about the acting?”

“No,” he answered passionately, and rose to his feet. But in the next moment he had resumed his seat beside her, only too willingly. “You know how anxious I am to hear anything you will tell me,” he said, pushing the loose hair from his forehead.

“Then I will tell you,” said Theo, demurely, “another time. The one striking incident running through the drama was the crying of a baby in the pit. Plaintively and persistently that indefatigable infant wailed through three acts. Through the fourth the star actor talked, from the stage, to its parent, entreating, as a personal favour, that it should be taken to mourn outside. For a few minutes there was silence, but as soon as the actors had started off again hopefully, the crying was renewed, and so it continued to the end, vigorous and irrepressible. The acting was far too good to be spoiled, yet no one attempted to turn the mother out. When we left the theatre,” the girl went on, without waiting for him to speak, “the crowd was very big, but Hardy and I got between a policeman and a railway porter, and so we were all right. After that——”

“Surely you came home then?”

“Came home then?” ejaculated Theo, in calm disdain. “Why, we had had no tea. It was a great disappointment to us to find that if we had had the forethought to carry tea we need only

have paid twopence each, and have made it from a tap in the gardens, and that as it was we had to pay ninepence each. But of course it was a great privilege," she went on, looking among the crowd with lively interest, "to have it on a green table out on the grass, with a band playing behind, and so many people looking on. After tea the people began to dance in a large hall where the band was playing; but,"—sorrowfully—"Hardy and I did not dance. Do you know I saw two girls, evidently little servant maids, waltz together as well as I have seen any couple waltz to-night."

"And you could really stand and look on—"

"There were no chairs," interpolated Theo.

"I do not mean—"

"I think you seldom mean what you seem to do, Mr. Derham."

"Did you ever come across anyone, Miss Hurst, who could be always quite sure whether you were jesting or not?"

"Oh, always—until I met you," she said, in perfect truthfulness, knowing how little he could understand why this was true.

"Put my feelings out of this question," he said, "and acknowledge you were among simple, honest holiday-makers to-day; still I think if you had remembered your own home—"

"I remembered it through every minute of the day," the girl answered, very gently.

"And yet you did what would have given trouble there."

"And yet I did," she said, with strange, slow gravity, "what would have shocked them—as it has shocked you. I knew it would shock you. I did not care."

"I have no right, I know," he said, in simple earnestness, "to remind you of that happy home of yours, but I cannot help it. My thoughts go so often there. Theo, do you remember the evening you showed me the sunset, from your favourite spot in the hilly churchyard? I shall never have such another perfect hour until you——"

"That was nothing to the sunset we saw to-day, as we drove from Shoreham. I sat with my back to the horse to see it better. Hardy told me she had once had a shawl of the same colours."

Then suddenly, with an unconscious sigh, Theo let her eyes soften, for Rex—glad to hide the sternness of his face—had risen to meet Angel, and just then a gentleman bearing himself well, and dressed to perfection, bowed to Theo with marked courtesy.

"Why, Theo," exclaimed Angel, looking round at her in surprise, "that is the French gentleman who stared at you this morning. Has Rex introduced you?"

"Indeed I have not," said Rex, his eyes darkening with passion under the drawn brows. "How dare the man presume—?"

"I bowed to him first," said Theo, calmly. "Didn't you see? He was very kind to us to-day, fetching our cab in Shoreham; and I like him very much, Mr. Derham. If he asks you for a formal introduction to us, please to give it, for I would like to dance with him—Ah, I think that bald gentleman with his eye upon us is my next partner."

When the dance was over, and this party had unwillingly left her at Mrs. Burtle's side, she stood in a thoughtful silence so unusual with her, that her grandmother broke it abruptly.

"Theo, why doesn't Rex Derham take you to dance? I particularly wish you and Rex to be friends. Edgar Morison has proposed to me for Angel, and I've told him that he has my consent. He has an excellent position, and Angel will have all she desires. I am pleased about it, and I have a plan for you. Angel will be happy; and if you——"

"Is that so, really?" asked Theo, very low and unsteadily, and, when the old lady had answered curtly in the affirmative, Theo waited until Angel was brought to her aunt.

"Angel," she whispered, drawing her cousin apart, while Angel smiled to see the gladness on her face, "I could not waltz to the end, and so I have been watching you and Mr. Morison, and some one was saying he is your lover, and wishes to marry you, and that you—— Oh, Angel dear, is it—do you—shall you ever——"

A merry but disdainful laugh burst from Angel's lips. "Shall I ever—I know what you mean, dear. Shall I ever marry him? *Him!*" she repeated, wonderingly. "Oh, no. How could I, Theo, after knowing——"

The sentence was not finished. There was no need, for Angel's eyes had sought Rex Derham, and Theo's followed them.

"I—I see you could not," Theo said, and stood very still, her face a little turned away; until Rex came up to her with Monsieur Le Marchand and introduced him to her very formally.

"I importuned Mr. Derham for this favour," the stranger said, in a low voice, and certainly with no attempt to conceal his French accent. "I hope you forgive me, Miss Hurst."

Theo's smile was very slight as she took the offered arm, and Rex noticed that they did not join the dancers, but sat as if to rest. Even afterwards, when he found the lounge vacant, he could not see these two among the dancers. Later on, when he went to claim Angel for her last dance with him, she looked into his face wistfully.

"Rex," she said, "Clara Morison told me you were looking tired and harassed. Are you anxious to go as soon as—? That

laugh is re-assuring, but I do so hope you are enjoying yourself, Rex. I wonder where Theo is? I haven't seen her for quite a long time."

"She is in the grounds."

"Still with Monsieur Le Marchand?"

"Still with Monsieur Le Marchand. Let us have our dance."

Without loitering at her side when it was over, or proposing to take her out into the sweet, pure air, he left the room, and walked slowly among the coloured lamps, looking in vain for the two figures he sought. But at the end of one path, leaning against the low rails, stood Theo, alone and very still, a sadness beyond the sadness of the dusk upon her brilliant beauty.

"Where is Monsieur Le Marchand?" asked Rex, involuntarily.

"Gone. I asked him to go, and he was—kind."

"You are tired," Rex said, anxiously, as he offered her his arm.

"No, not tired. I am very seldom tired—" yet in such a weary tone.

"I hope that in your moments of solitude, Theo, you have no despondent thoughts to hold you in a dreary grip, as they hold me."

"I was only recalling then," the girl said, in her sweet, grave way, "poor Stephen Blackpool's weary speech, 'It's a' a muddle.' I hope we are going home."

"Before our dance? Impossible!" he cried, yet a moment afterwards felt sorry to have vexed her by his own vexation.

"Am I to give it up?" he asked, patiently.

"Not if you care for it," she gently said. "I think I have refused the next dance several times, but I will dance it with you, if we are going afterwards."

When that long waltz was over, and Theo had dismissed Rex, and was sitting at her grandmother's side, feverishly telling her would-be partners that she must rest, Angel came up to her, and whispered wistfully, as she leaned over her couch.

"Theo dear, don't encourage that French gentleman. He watches you so noticeably, and yet he never seeks an introduction to Aunt Burtle. Clara overheard some stupid creature tell him you were the rich Mrs. Burtle's heiress—just as anyone would have said it of me, dear, if I had been the subject of discussion—and his seeking you so persistently, looks suspicious, I fear. Do forgive my anxiety, Theo, when you are so much the wiser; but I cannot help it; and Rex is anxious too, as I can see by his face. I only mean will you be cautious, dear, and—— Oh, you understand."

"I understand," said Theo, looking down the long room, but Angel knew she had grown very pale.

"And you forgive me for speaking? It is only just to put you on your guard."

"I am on my guard," said Theo, quietly, "but one must care for somebody."

CHAPTER X.

"PURSUED IN LOVE."

"I'm afraid, Theo, the band has not the same attraction for you that it had at first," said Angel, ruefully.

"Not the same attraction," ejaculated Theo, startled out of her reverie, "while it is so true to 'Pinafore!' Impossible."

The girls were sitting on an outer seat of the west pier, and one of them at least was keenly listening for an expected foot-step.

"Then you feel tired after last night's dance, Theo?"

"Tired! I, who am used to the school treats in Little Darben?"

No, she could not be fagged, Angel thought, as she glanced into the bright, dark face; and yet there was a certain indefinable change. These varied moods of stillness and restlessness certainly never had belonged to Theo in the old time, and Angel could not understand.

"You are sure you still enjoy Brighton, Theo?"

"My dear, I think, with Hood, that, of all the trees I know, there is not one to be mentioned in the same breath with the magnificent beach at Brighton."

"Theo, did you wonder what Marion Eliot was laughing about this morning, when you came into their room, for me? It was something she had copied from an old book, and she was teasing me."

"Of course," observed Theo. She was leaning back in her corner of the seat; tall, and lithe, and slender, in her plain, pink cambric, with a pink convolvulus wreath round her woodland hat, its brim, in a crumpled scoop above the soft, dark hair, giving an extra piquancy to her face as she looked out upon the sunny sea.

"She told me to read this paper to Rex," continued Angel, blushing even at the suggestion, but laughing too, "and of course I shall not. But I shall to you, Theo, and then you will know whether you are in love."

"Should I? Then the test for one fits all, Angel. If so—if love came to us all in the same way, and for the same end"—the

tone changed suddenly, but Angel did not notice that, because she too could distinguish now the step for which she had been listening—"it would not be such a joke as it is."

"A joke!" echoed Rex Derham, stopping opposite the girls. "Do let me hear it."

"Oh, Rex," interposed Angel, in timid deprecation, "we were only talking nonsense, through a ridiculous mood the Eliots were in when I was there."

"We were wondering," said Theo, with calm defiance, "what it was like to be in love. Marian Eliot has been teaching Angel the symptoms."

"Theo," cried Angel, in real distress, "it was only Marian's fun, and the nonsense she had been reading."

"Not nonsense," observed Rex, coolly seating himself between the two girls; for Angel, in her polite attempt to hide the paper she held, without appearing to do so, had moved away from Theo's side; "I saw what it was. Mirandula's twelve marks, by which, as he says, we may judge of a true and real love. Let us judge of yours, Angel."

"Oh, no, indeed," cried Angel, frightened as a child of what she might betray. "It is such a babyish idea."

"Yours, Miss Hurst?"

"Do," she said, readily; and the beautiful eyes, scarce shaded by the narrow gipsy hat, returned his gaze with swift, sweet frankness. "I really want to have my mind set at ease, for I fancy I am in love, but cannot be certain. Why do you look so astonished, Mr. Derham?"

"Who would not?" he asked, forcing himself to look away from the nonchalant face. "Who is ever to comprehend you?"

"Mirandula, of course. Please tell me some of the twelve marks, if you remember any really, for Angel will never consent to lend us that paper."

"Yes, I can remember the important ones," he said, conscious of a vague sense of disappointment in her light tone. "For instance, one is 'to love one, and one only—'"

"Easy, and very natural," assented Theo, in his pause.

"And to condemn all others in comparison with that one?—Is that easy to you, too, Miss Theo, and natural?"

"Yes, I condemn—that means despise, doesn't it?—you all in comparison with that one. Another, please."

"There is one—'To adjust one's self in such a manner as to render one's person acceptable to the party beloved!'"

"I see. That accounts for my needing so much new frilling now, and ruining myself in the pursuit of becoming veils, and envying poppy-coloured sunshades. Well?"

"To weep often on their account," resumed Rex, with a quizzical sidelong glance. "I am afraid you fail there."

"That," returned Theo, gravely; "is not a nice sensation, nor do I think Mr. Mirandula has fitted it nicely with 'to adjust one's self in such a manner as to render one's person acceptable to the party beloved.' Tearful eyes are not acceptable, I should fancy, to any party beloved. Yes?"

"To believe them possessed of the greatest perfections," Rex went on, with perfect gravity, "'and to draw others to the same belief.'"

"I do believe it," Theo answered, slowly, "but I cannot draw others to the same belief—no, not with cords."

"To be always in readiness to suffer for their sake, and to think such suffering sweet."

"I am ready," the girl said, "to suffer for their sake; but, with a grave shake of the head, "not to think such suffering sweet. Is that all, Mr. Derham?"

"I remember," continued Rex, taxing his memory anxiously, while he wondered what sounded unnatural in the girl's bright tone; "that one is 'to love his friends, kindred, house, clothes, or whatsoever does in any way relate to them.'"

"I don't love their friends or kindred," Theo answered, with a change of tone; "but their house and clothes I do. The rest is doubtful, because Mrs. Burtle does in any way relate to them."

"Oh, Theo," cried Angel, laughing, "you mean me, I do believe!"

"As if that were at all probable," said Theo, soberly; while Rex was conscious of a pleasant sensation of relief. "Is there no other you can remember, Mr. Derham?"

"I remember that the last is 'to languish always and expire in desire after them!'"

"What a sensible ending; certainly, if I am to languish always, the sooner I expire the better. And those are all you remember? And all true, are they? Those hundreds of black specks along the beach there—being each a person with a history of his own—all carry these same marks, if they love, do they?"

"Why, Theo!" laughed Angel, "you ask the question as solemnly as if Rex knew."

"He ought to know," observed Theo, abstractedly, as she sat looking now away from the sea, with its splashes of dark, ruddy brown, to the long miles of shore, and the fleet, cool shadows flying over the lines of houses.

"Theo," said Angel, presently, "we have a sort of holiday again to-day till dinner-time."

"You don't forget the Aquarium Concert this afternoon," put in Rex. "The seats are secured,"

"Thank you, Rex. Oh, we remember that, and Theo is longing to hear Henschel; but Aunt Burtle is going to lunch in Cliftonville, and will only come home by seven. You dine with us, you know?"

"Thank you, yes. Miss Hurst, are you longing for another trip to Shoreham?"

"That concert comes sadly in the way," returned Theo, in a placid, matter-of-fact manner. "Don't you think the tracery of the chain pier looks graceful and beautiful against the cliff? I wish I were there."

"Really, you are perverse," laughed Angel, with good-humoured honesty. "You have seemed to like this pier so very much."

"'What is lighter than a feather?'" quoted Rex, smiling.

"'The dust that blows in summer weather,'" returned Theo, and completed the couplet for him merrily, with full, cool comprehension of his meaning, and of his own pause.

"'What's lighter than the dust, I pray?
The wind that blows the dust away.
And what is lighter than the wind?
The lightness of a woman's mind.
And what is lighter than that last?
Ah! there, my friend, you have me fast.'"

You should never begin to quote, Mr. Derham, unless you feel able to go through the passage. Monsieur Le Marchand; it was Mr. Derham, not I, who introduced that sentiment among us. I was only supplying the deficiency of his memory."

Monsieur Le Marchand had come up to them, and raised his hat courteously, and, though Theo spoke with such indifference, she had blushed almost painfully. And Rex Derham, though jealously aware of this, showed little sign of it, while he bore his share in the conversation.

Angel felt she had sufficiently done her duty last night in warning Theo that this stranger might have interested motives in seeking her, and now took part in the conversation with a lightened mind; while Theo, carelessly leading it where she would, was the only one to whom this light, trifling chat was difficult.

"The *Skylark* is starting on one of her trips," said Rex, noticing that Theo's eyes seemed watching the schooner leave the long, busy beach. "I wonder you do not wish for a voyage in her, Miss Hurst?"

"I do. I want to see the player of that cornet we always hear."

"Do you row, Miss Hurst?" inquired Monsieur Le Marchand, fully aware how trivial the talk had been since he joined the little group.

"Oh, no," she answered, losing the laziness of tone, "I cannot. I can do very few things."

"Even if you never row on the sea, you have surely done so on your beautiful rivers, with the many friends who would be glad to teach you, as I know."

"As you guess, perhaps. You cannot know."

"Will you pardon my asking you a question, Miss Hurst?" he said, leaning on his stick while he stood near her, and using French words frequently, as he did in every speech except the briefest. "I was in England once before, almost five years ago, and one day I believe I saw you rowing among the beautiful reaches (do you not call them ?) of your Thames. It is difficult to forget a face like yours, even in five years. You were with an older lady. May I ask if she was your elder sister?"

"My mother," smiled Theo, "though she always looked far more like my sister, as you say."

"And a gentleman who, I presume, was——"

"Yes," put in Theo, hurriedly. "We often—my father was fond of boating. And so you really saw us once, monsieur, and remember?"

"Indeed, I remember. Will a thousand pardons be accorded me if I ask for madame la mère?"

"She is well, thank you."

Then there was a marked silence, but, as Monsieur Le Marchand made no attempt to leave them, Theo broke it presently.

"I wish I were sitting on the beach under the pier; it is so shady there, and so pleasant to look down the cool green vista."

"All right," said Rex, with promptness, "I will take you."

"I mean," resumed Theo, in apparent meditation, "that I should like it, if it would not be going voluntarily into the very jaws of ruin. You have no sooner got rid, after superhuman efforts, of a seller of sweets than you are in the power of a seller of pebbles, and you have no sooner succeeded wilyly in dismissing that seller of pebbles than you are lured into extravagance by a seller of shell boxes; and through all goes on a running fire of lace-sellers."

"Then you prefer staying here?" interrogated Rex, heavily, as if he suspected her reason.

"Yes, I think so. I wonder," lazily, "where Hardy is. She would come here, I fancy, as she is free, and she will be lonely. I must go round and look."

"I am at your service," said Rex, unwitting how very obviously he intercepted what Monsieur Le Marchand had been going to say.

"Yet I feel sure," Theo ruminated from her corner seat, "that, being very sensible, Hardy has gone to the chain pier in pre-

ference to this. It is very nice there. One can fancy oneself on the deck of a very clean green and white vessel."

"Will you come there?" asked Rex, still with infinite patience; and Theo's careless, quizzical gaze told nothing of the real pain it gave her to find that the whims and perversity she had fancied would turn him from her, had had no such effect.

"Not quite yet. Mr. Derham," she said, recklessly seeking an excuse, and not caring how ridiculous a one, "you have for weeks been devoured by curiosity to consult that oracle on the little table. Monsieur Le Marchand, I believe *you* are consumed by a similar desire."

"All right," put in Rex, with steady determination. "It is the very most transparent imposture, but my heart hangs on the answer I shall—through craft and subtlety—obtain to a question I am going to ask. Come, Miss Hurst."

"Are you shocked, Angel?" inquired Theo, keeping now close beside her cousin, since Rex Derham had planted himself beside her.

"It is very silly," acknowledged Angel, wondering why she could not show contempt for Theo's latest caprice, "but," she added, pleasantly, as she walked in the line Theo so scrupulously kept, and could speak to her unheard, "you make us all silly when you choose, Theo—even Rex."

"He is always weak," whispered Theo, mischievously.

"But remember, dear, that this stranger—It is almost luncheon-time," corrected Angel, in a tone her cousin understood. But what need could Theo feel for Angel's admonition? It was all exactly the reverse of what Angel feared. To Theo there was comparative rest now that Monsieur Le Marchand was with them. And had he not forged a link between them by remembering having seen her with her dear ones in the old, old days?

"Now, Miss Theo," said Mr. Derham, as they all stopped at the oracle's table; a little group to win notice anywhere, and, by pausing here, exciting many a quizzical, amused, and wondering, if not disdainful, glance; "you must choose our questions." And he laid before her and Angel the little list of questions presented by the proprietor of the oracle.

"Well, Angel?" interrogated Theo, her eyes bright with laughter.

"I think," said Angel, prettily and simply addressing Monsieur Le Marchand, instead of Rex, "I should ask this one, '*Will wealth and power be mine?*'"

"And for me, Miss Theo?" inquired Rex, steadily adhering to his resolve that she should choose for him.

"I want," she said, reading so intently as not to seem aware

how his eyes sought hers, "something funnier. Ask this, for it is most important, *Shall I win the object of my affections?*"

"Thank you," he said, involuntarily, and his face flushed, though he laughed.

While the wheel was set in motion, and the very transparent little mystery was played, Theo stood intently and silently watching, even silencing Angel when she spoke.

"It is all so serious," she said, effectually destroying all seriousness by the comic solemnity of her own expression. "Well?" she asked, breathlessly, when Monsieur Le Marchand and Mr. Derham had received the slips of paper pointed to by the little wooden oracle, in his race round the table.

"There is mine," said Monsieur Le Marchand, giving the paper into Theo's hands.

"*Wealth and power*," she read, "*have never been beyond your grasp*. Capital, is it not? And did you grasp them, monsieur?"

"The future holds the answer to that question, mademoiselle.

"Now read mine, Miss Theo," put in Rex, laughing heartily.

"*Yes; and the object of your affection longs to be thine*. How nice, grammar and all!"

"I almost think, Mr. Derham," observed Monsieur Le Marchand, rather pointedly, as they all walked away from the oracle, "I would hate such an answer as that. There is no ring of truth about it, for the object of one's affections rarely, if ever, longs to be ours. Such is human nature!"

"If I were a man," said Theo, recklessly, "I would never waste one grain of affection on a woman, if my heart told me she did not value it. What a woman does not give at once, she cannot have to give at all—or it cannot be worth giving. I should know that quite well, if I were a man."

"Infinite knowledge, infinite experience," said the Frenchman, quizzically, while Angel stared in surprise at Theo's unexpected logic, and Rex walked silently—hurt a little, it would seem.

"This is your paper, Mr. Derham," she said, presently. They were walking back past their former seats, and Rex had adroitly taken Monsieur Le Marchand's place beside Theo when they had had to separate into couples. "Of course you wish to keep it."

"When you give it back to me, Theo," he said, in a low, intense voice, "I shall understand its truth."

"When I give it back to you?" the girl repeated, her beautiful eyes frankly meeting his, though sea and sky seemed dancing before them; the slender figure proud and straight, though the heart within her throbbed hurriedly, painfully, as she understood him; understood that in this minute she might have known the crowning glory of her womanhood,

"Yes, when you give it me, it will be your message. Until you can, and will—Oh, Theo, keep it until then."

"I do not understand."

The words were so quiet and so cold! What could he ever guess of the passionate longing—almost unbearable—which the girl hid so well, while she conquered in the fight for which she had been so unprepared, and unflinchingly stood to bear the death-blow?

"Forgive me if I seem to ask too much," he said, in a voice of deep emotion; "but it shall be in your own time. You know now the question I have often before to-day been tempted to ask you, and I will await your answer as patiently as a man can. Of course the paper you hold is rubbish, but when you give it back to me I shall be the happiest fellow in the world, even if you only tell me you will try to love me—presently."

"As you say," she answered, her words strangely slow and difficult, though her eyes burned with a feverish, troubled light, "this paper is rubbish. I asked Angel, the other day, what these holes in the pier were for, and she said the men sweep the dust and rubbish down them; so—this is all right."

And she stooped and carefully dropped the paper into the sea below.

CHAPTER XI.

"UPHEAVING TIDES."

"PLEASE don't talk," whispered Theo. "I want to listen, and to look."

"Not at the singers," smiled Angel, "for you are staring all the time up into the fernery. I'm sorry—sorrrier than you, dear—that Monsieur Le Marchand is so near to us at this concert, but, as he is, we ought to talk to him when he addresses us from his chair behind."

"You say *we* ought, but you never fail in your politeness, Angel. I know I seem as if I did not feel your goodness."

"There is nothing for you to feel. You are always too grateful. Theo dear, are you enjoying this?"

"So much! It is such a rest that I dread its ending."

"So do I," said Angel, with bright sympathy, though she did not need—and therefore did not feel—the rest that Theo meant, a rest for eyes, and ears, and heart.

"I wonder a little at Rex leaving us between the parts," said Angel, "but I wonder still more at his staying away so long,

Don't you think, Theo, that he has seemed dull and absent ever since we were so childish on the pier this morning?"

"How can I know, dear, for he has been with you?"

"Why, it was you who begged me to sit between you this afternoon," expostulated Angel, gently. "I wonder where Rex has gone?"

Though not in answer to this remark, for the girls had whispered very low, Monsieur Le Marchand leaned forward and spoke to Angel.

"Your friend Mr. Derham must have found it too warm here in the conservatory. He is standing at the back."

"I think he is wise," returned Angel, loyally. "We are rather too near the band."

"You are right, Miss Sullivan, but I don't think he means to lose sight of you. I fear he will not give me the privilege of supplying his place."

When the concert was over, Angel began to fear that Rex *had* been going to give Monsieur Le Marchand this privilege, but just beyond the crowd he stood waiting for them in the corridor, and they all strolled together to the terrace, feeling the fresh air a luxury, and sitting down to talk of the music they had heard.

"Miss Hurst," Rex said, quizzically, speaking to her across Angel, "were you comparing it disparagingly with your Shoreham concert? Once you looked very much as if you were."

"I was comparing my neighbours. A lady on my left to-day said, when the prima donna sang, that her daughter had 'just such delicious *vibrato* overtones, and the same genius for artistic elaboration.' I remembered how the lady on my left at Shoreham had said, under similar circumstances, with emphatic brevity, 'Our'n can go 'igher nur that.'"

"Rex," said Angel, when the laughter had subsided, "I have a fancy for seeing the sea-lions fed to-day. Will you come?"

"Most willingly. Will your cousin also?"

"I have seen them fed," said Theo, as if that were conclusive.

"But why not again?" suggested Angel, with a motive.

"Because—like Princess Elizabeth—"God hath blessed, or cursed, me with a nose."

"You are too bad," laughed Angel.

"I will attend Miss Hurst in your absence, Mr. Derham," said the Frenchman. "I am sure she is generous, and will speak to me in my own tongue for a little, that I may not halt or bungle."

Theo smiled acquiescence. She had always noticed that, when she was alone with Monsieur Le Marchand, he dropped his broken English and spoke only in French; not rapidly as Frenchmen do, but slowly, out of consideration, she felt sure, for her imperfect utterance of his language.

When Mr. Derham and Angel returned, the seat where they left Theo was vacant, and it was some minutes before they thought of mounting to the balcony. When they did, and found her and her companion calmly talking there, Angel apologised for having been detained by meeting several people whom she knew. "But we are ready now," Miss Sullivan went on. "Will you come?"

"Not yet," returned Theo, coolly.

"But," expostulated Angel, taking out her watch, "I fear we have barely time to reach home by dinner-time."

"I am not hungry. I would rather stay a little longer. Will you please tell Mrs. Burtle I did not care about dinner?"

"But, Theo," exclaimed her cousin, incredulously, "we must all go together. Aunt Burtle will be angry—I mean anxious."

"No, she will never suffer anxiety on my account," replied Theo, calmly; "she never has, and she told me, only yesterday, that she shall never consider you to blame for my 'antics.'"

"Miss Hurst," put in Mr. Derham, with rather ominous quietude, "like Miss Sullivan, you were in my charge for the afternoon."

"I know," the girl assented, "but the afternoon is over; so is your onerous responsibility. Surely I may stay here a little longer if I wish it so much."

"I suppose so," said Angel, feeling the unconscious piteousness of her tone; "and yet—Theo," she observed, presently, with a sudden hope, "Rex dines with us this evening."

"I daresay," was the gentle, brief reply.

"It is absurd to suppose," exclaimed Rex, in the impatience of real agitation, "that we can leave you here alone, Miss Hurst."

"Perhaps," suggested Theo, simply, though she grew a little pale as she spoke, "Monsieur Le Marchand may not be going to leave quite yet."

"Indeed I am not," he answered, readily. "Not until you desire to follow your friends. Then I wait on mademoiselle as convoy."

"I will return," said Rex, addressing Monsieur Le Marchand, "for Miss Hurst after I have left Miss Sullivan at home."

"That is quite unnecessary," Theo observed, with a strange impulsive movement towards the Frenchman.

"The young Englishman is jealous a little, and—suspicious," observed Monsieur Le Marchand, with a shrug of his shoulders, when he and Theo were left.

"The young Englishman is kind and trustworthy," was the girl's warm reply. "Now please do exactly what you choose, monsieur, for I am going to read this paper. When do you dine?"

"That signifies nothing."

"Oh, indeed it does. I forget the hour of *table-d'hôte* at the Grand Hotel."

"I have left there. I have taken rooms in the New Steine—unfortunately, quite a long distance from your house—because I may stay longer in Brighton than I had intended."

"I see," said Theo, low and rather stiffly, without turning her head. "Now, I am going to read, while you dine."

For several minutes he stood entreating her to go downstairs and take refreshment; then to allow him to stay with her; but when he saw her resolute in her refusals, he left her; as unwilling to intrude upon her against her will as he evidently was to leave her sitting there alone. He had just returned to her, after what she thought a short absence, when Rex Derham stood before her, waiting for her to lift her eyes from the paper.

"Can you possibly have returned already?" she asked, with a great effort to be utterly unmoved.

"Yes; Miss Sullivan preferred to drive, so it did not take us long."

"And you drove back too? It was unkind. *Must* I come—if Monsieur Le Marchand is ready?"

Whatever reply Mr. Derham would have been tempted to make, was prevented by a glad spontaneous cry from Theo.

"It's Hardy!" she said, her eyes beaming with inexplicable gratitude, as she looked at a quiet, elderly woman who was just then seating herself at one of the little tables on the balcony. "Don't have tea there, Hardy," the girl cried, going up to her, and laying a hand on her shoulder. "Of course it was tea you meditated. Wait a little; I want you to have it with me properly. I wondered why you weren't here to-day, as you were at liberty, and now I am so glad to see you. Mr. Derham, you see I'm all right, and I'm going to wait for the terrace concert, as I have wished."

"You will let me stay, too," he asked, and for one moment her great longing—understanding his—made her heart beat with a pain almost unbearable; then she calmly met his yearning, impassioned gaze, and gently reminded him he was engaged to dine with Mrs. Burtle. "Tell her," the girl went on, still very pale, but almost coldly now, "that I am staying for the concert. She lets me see and hear all I like, and she will not be angry. Hardy has this day's liberty too, and we are together, and will come back together. Several of Angel's friends are here, I think, and she will understand how I am tempted. It will be a moonlight night. You—you look angry, Mr. Derham, or hurt with me, because you don't understand, but it is a very simple little pleasure that I

take. No, don't ask me again, please, and *you* cannot stay. I know you don't wish to hurt me, and offend Mrs. Burtle by insisting; and I am determined. Now, monsieur, will you and Mr. Derham, on your way out, take Hardy and me to the restaurant for tea?"

And then Rex Derham—being a true gentleman, and seeing not only the girl's resolute determination, but that she turned to Monsieur Le Marchand, and not to him—gave his arm to Hardy, who took it in fluttering delighted awe.

"Who is that, Miss Hurst?" inquired Theo's companion as they followed.

"Mrs. Burtle's senior maid, chiefly kept for her invaluable powers as nurse to an invalid. Mrs. Burtle keeps a younger maid for ordinary wear."

"I see. Mrs. Burtle can afford all luxuries—for herself."

"Yes. You did not seem to notice Hardy. I thought you were unaware of her presence up there."

"On the contrary, I even fancied I recognized her face as one I had seen before."

"Indeed! Did you recall where?"

"I was too anxiously debating with myself whether we had any right to leave you here with her."

"Oh, yes, she is most trustworthy. If you had looked at her properly, you would have seen that in her face."

"Is it possible? I am afraid, on the contrary, I should only have recalled to my memory a famous retort of Dr. Williamson's. 'There's no fool like the foolhardy.'"

Theo turned her face slowly and thoughtfully to her companion.

"Some one else has quoted that to me of Hardy. I forget when, I forget whom," she said, "I wonder—— Oh, this is the restaurant. No, please. Oh, certainly not. Hardy shall order what she likes, for that will be half the fun."

But Rex Derham, in his quiet, cool way, had arranged what Monsieur Le Marchand had failed in his anxiety to do. "I shall come back for you, Miss Hurst," he said, offering her his hand, as if to be quite sure she was not vexed with him.

"Only," she answered, resolutely, "if Angel comes. We are safe and comfortable here."

"Miss Theo," whispered Hardy, when the gentlemen had left, "that waiter has orders to bring a dinner tea of all the most tempting things he has; and"—weightily—"it is paid for."

It was a tea Hardy remembered for a long, long time; so delicious, so merry, so new to her in every way; and when it was over they left the waiter looking after them with equal admiration and gratitude.

"We will sit on the balcony," said Theo, brightly, "because it is the best place in the moonlight for a wide view over the sea. Oh, Hardy, how nice it will be, won't it?"

Hardy's responses were, as a rule, tardy, she preferring soliloquy to dialogue, and often Theo forgot her question before the reply was vouchsafed; but this evening she insisted on it, with a strange longing to hear that *some one* was happy, because in her own heart there was so keen a pain to-night.

Vividly, through the time to come, could she recall that one hour. The people in groups walking or sitting below her among the lights; the band reflected to twice their number, and the lights above them doubling themselves too; the deepening, widening line of moonlight on the sea, throwing up the dark tracery of the old pier like an unreal thing, and dwindling the lights upon it to a sickly hue and worthless size, though when a cloud came sailing on the soft west wind, and hid the moon one minute, the little pier lights grew important items in the scene, and made Theo think of the one puzzle of her life. A wonderful, beautiful wide scene! She never recalled the mighty effort she made to be quite patient through Hardy's long soliloquies; only the peace and beauty of the night when only the music broke its silence.

Then of Monsieur Le Marchand's voice behind her, and the consciousness of looking with startled wonder at the dark, thin hand upon her chair; then of being ashamed of the wonder and the start she had given, yet longing to understand them.

"Miss Hurst, may I persuade you to take a little exercise down in the terrace gardens? It is chilly for you to sit here, and I will not entice you to stay a moment longer than you choose. A little constitutional, Mrs. Hardy," he explained, turning to Theo's companion; but his accent was too foreign for her to readily comprehend. "I am sure you also recommend it for Miss Hurst. I will bring her back to you in this spot almost immediately."

"I wonder," mused Theo, as if to herself; but she had risen and seemed ready to go, though with no eagerness; "whether Mr. Derham and Miss Sullivan are coming."

"Not they, Miss Theo," put in Hardy, emphatically. "Mrs. Burtle would never allow that—no fear."

Then Theo stood in hesitation. There would be many acquaintances of her grandmother's here this night who could tell of all she did, and so Angel would know—and Rex. And Rex! Yes, that would be better.

"I will come," she said, yet as she moved away, refusing Monsieur Le Marchand's arm, she looked back wistfully at the

woman whose companionship had grown so ineffably wearisome to her, and would have gone back if it had not been for the thought that it would be well for Rex to hear.

Through the rest of the concert Hardy sat alone, with a dull, phlegmatic appreciation of the exquisite moonlight, and a perfect ease, both physical and mental, not to be disturbed by any fear for Theo. It was not until the crowd had dispersed, and she had risen and stood looking round for her charge, in a vague curiosity as to which direction she and the Frenchman had taken, that Theo came up to her alone, and stood a few moments at her side, looking away over the moonlit sea; very pale, and yet with a feverish brilliancy in her eyes.

"Come, Miss Theo," exclaimed Hardy, breaking the silence she could not comprehend, "you don't want to be shut in 'ere, I suppose, much as you like it."

"Hardy," said the girl, the fingers of one small hand closing over Hardy's substantial wrist, though she did not turn her eyes from their far-off gaze, "have you a mother?"

"I had, Miss Theo, when I came to live with your respectable grand'ma, but she's dead, long time back. She died on a visit to Boston—that's Boston in Lincashire, not that Boston in New York. She was buried there, and lies there to this day."

"Dead," repeated Theo, in deep thought. "That is good."

"Good, Miss Theo? That shows 'ow much you know about such things. I call it bad."

"You would think it worse," the girl said, still looking far away, "for her to be living, if you were to live too, and—never dare to see her again."

"La, yes, Miss Theo, twice as worse."

CHAPTER XII.

"LIFE'S RESTLESS SEA."

ALONE in an almost deserted part of the beach on the Kemptown side of Brighton, Theo sat looking out over the sea, but seeing nothing of its sparkle, for the wide horizon, limitless to youth, was all grey to her. The girl, who had won envious glances from those who saw that she was young and passing beautiful, knew there was not one among the homely, plain, or low-born girls who envied her, with whom she would not have gladly exchanged the life that lay before her. For two long hours she had sat there, solitary beside the sea, and the hours had seemed as minutes, because the dreaded having to bury thought once more beneath

gay words and smiles; yet when a voice behind her gladly called her.—"Theo, found at last!"—she had a welcoming smile for Angel; and no one could see how bravely she laid aside her own thought—tenderly, as we lay a covering on the face of our dead—and was, so Angel felt, just kind, and calm, and merry, as she always had been.

"Why have you stayed away from us so long, dear?" Angel asked, as she and Mr. Derham joined her. "Aunt Burtle is driving up and down the King's Road, and we've promised to find you. Come. Have you really been sitting in the sun? What will become of your complexion?"

"Don't you know how 'he that is down needs fear no fall'?"

"Rex, whenever I go anywhere to meet Theo," laughed Angel, "I always find her keeping on the sunny side."

"Unfortunately, I cannot keep on the sunny side of twenty."

"One thing I know," said Rex, laughing, "you will always be on the sunny side of any age."

"Theo, fancy Edgar Morison getting so romantic last night as to tell me that your smile was like sunshine. He insinuated that he had been talking to you very funnily."

"Scarcely, but he talked punnily."

"You chose to listen to no one else, last night, Miss Hurst."

"Any new friend attracts me," Theo coolly explained. "Hardy has almost ceased to be a psychological study, and so I need some one fresh."

"It is not like you, Theo. Is it only waywardness?"

"No, I have another reason."

"I thought so," said Rex, wondering over that swift look of trouble crossing her face; but her quiet answer puzzled him again.

"Mr. Derham, why do you not tell us what you think at the time? It would be exciting—rather. You always tell us afterwards that you *thought so*, and, as it is always right, that is aggravating. Now, are you ready to go?"

She paused a moment, glancing over the sea. It was only to avoid Mr. Derham's quizzical, questioning gaze, but for long afterwards she remembered that look, and how they stood waiting for her—the two, who, with the mother far away, made the girl's world.

"I decidedly object," observed Mrs. Burtle, rigidly, when the girls were seated opposite her in the carriage, "to your being joined by any gentleman who has not sought my acquaintance. That Frenchman has made no effort to bring himself before my notice, and yet here I meet you discoursing as unceremoniously with him as if he were Rex Derham. I do not say I object to

him: I presume you have the instincts of a lady, Theo, and would not allow the acquaintance of an adventurer; but, if he addresses you again, refer him to me. I don't question his having been properly introduced to you, but I certainly do not think his avoidance of me looks well. I am willing to know him, if his position be good."

After these remarks, Mrs. Burtle did not think it worth while to address either of the girls again before the carriage stopped at her own door, and they followed her into her handsome and unhome-like house.

But Angel could not keep her silence longer.

"It all sounds paltry, as Aunt Burtle puts it," she said, with tears in her eyes, as she followed Theo into her room, "but it is strange, Theo dear. I wish he did not know you were going to be rich. I wish he had not come to Brighton. I wish—I could almost wish you were not so pretty, Theo, because—Just think what Captain Leslie would say to see this Frenchman always joining you."

"Jack!" echoed Theo, startled strangely. "What put him into your mind, Angel?" and then she laughed, but very briefly.

"It was a natural thought," asserted Angel, with an anxious gaze into her cousin's face. "And still more naturally, I wondered what Aunt Helen would think."

"Mother?" said Theo, slowly. "What mother would think of it? I am going to drive with Monsieur Le Marchand to-morrow, Angel,"—with a strange, restless light in her eyes.

"Oh, Theo, do not do it!"

"Are you," Theo asked, her gentle hand upon her cousin's shoulder, "so anxious about my future life?"

"I cannot help it," pleaded the elder girl. "I love you so, Theo, that I want you to be happy, and to—make no mistake."

"To make no mistake," the younger added, thoughtfully. "And I remember how the dear Fräulein said the motive could not justify the act. Angel dear—" with a wistful tenderness Theo stooped and kissed her—"whatever mistake I make, remember that I, too, love you so that I *want you to be happy*."

"Miss Theo," remarked Hardy, putting her head in at the door that minute,—"Oh, and Miss Sullivan's here too, that's right—do be punctual at lunch to-day. The mistress is that cross, I know well what's coming for you, so I thought you should be repaired."

The girls hastened down, and were standing at the table when the old lady entered, but the meal passed in the usual way; and, though they were not encouraged to talk, their occasional remarks were not cut off more abruptly than usual. All through the

afternoon Mrs. Burtle lay dozing on a couch in the drawing-room, while Theo sat at the window looking out, with her work on her lap; and Angel was silent at the davenport writing a long letter to her Irish home. When the tea was brought in, Mrs. Burtle rose and took it with the girls, laughing afterwards when she suddenly remembered this was Lady Willoughby's day, and that she had promised to take afternoon tea with her.

"I wish you had told me, Aunt Burtle," said Angel, with regret. "I would have reminded you."

"And suppose I did not want to be reminded? Suppose I would as soon have tea here as in Lewes Crescent, and am as little bored by you two girls as by her ladyship? Ring, Theo; I want Hardy."

"Won't you have my arm to your room?"

"If you like."

"I do like," the girl said, with spontaneous earnestness. "I suppose it is human nature to like somebody to lean upon one."

"And you think you are a type of human nature, do you? Never mind, you are a good height, and your arm is round and steady; pleasanter to hold than Hardy's."

"Then may I come for you when the dinner bell rings, grandmother?"

It was the first time for many years that Theo had called the old lady so, and it almost startled her when she heard the word come from her lips so naturally.

It was the last word that fell upon the cold, stern, selfish heart. For an instant the thin lips relaxed into such a smile as Theo had never seen upon them yet; then "Theo," she whispered, with a questioning perplexity in the tone, and in another moment the girl's arms were round her, and with a supernatural strength she carried her to her couch.

They said it was the breaking of an artery on the brain, and that there had been no suffering; and Hardy whispered that she had known it had been coming; but Theo, sitting near her still, could not believe in death so swift and sudden, and chafed the soft white hands that had not known an hour's toil through seventy years; and gazed yearningly upon the closed eyes that never for seventy years had voluntarily looked upon suffering.

"Come away, dear," whispered Angel, lovingly, again and again; but it was midnight when Theo came at last, treading softly and unsteadily in the silent house, and with her eyes filled with a wondering question—as those dying eyes had been.

"Rex has been here," said Angel, through her tears, sitting with one arm round her cousin, whom she had taken to her own room; for death had made the house seem strange and empty

and terrible, and they could not separate; "and he would have liked to see you, Theo. He wanted to give you sympathy, I think. He was very kind and nice. Dr. Wade is very kind too, but Rex is different, and he has helped us so, and will do everything. He was in time to write to my home and to yours. He says Aunt Helen is sure to come to Brighton at once."

"Mother coming?" Theo had moved back from her cousin's side, her eyes dark and wide and full of trouble, all the hair pushed from her low white forehead, and a strange pallor on her beautiful young face. "Is—mother coming here?"

"My dear," cried Angel, and then in her distress could say no more, knowing that Theo must be terribly excited and worn and feverish to let relief and tenderness have this strange effect upon her. Poor Angel had thought so gratefully of having to tell her that the mother she loved would soon be with her.

"I felt so glad," Angel said presently, with grief unfeigned, and tears that would not be repressed, "and I was saying to Rex that perhaps she would bring your baby brother, and it would cheer us both. Oh, Theo, why do you look so strange and white and startled? You will be ill, my darling. Try to rest."

"No, I—must not," Theo said, and rose to her feet, with both hands on her temples. "I am all right, my dear. I will not frighten you again, and presently you will have—mother."

Then, without a warning cry or motion, the slight, straight figure drooped, and fell at Angel's feet.

CHAPTER XIII.

"BREAK, BREAK, BREAK."

"I AM afraid, Theo," Angel said, with the mournfulness of real compunction, "that it is scarcely becoming of us to drive out to-day." But Theo did not answer. "Aunt Burtle's death is known all over Brighton, and here are we two driving through the streets in a cab. Certainly it is closed," continued Angel, seeking redeeming features, because she could not bear to raise objections to what Theo wished, "and I really doubt whether anyone could recognize us; still, though I would go with you anywhere, Aunt Burtle's friends would say there was a want of propriety in our being out the day after her death."

"It is only there," said Theo, gently.

And in a few minutes the closed cab stopped before the handsome cemetery gates, and, after the girls had left it, drew up at the edge of the road to await their return.

"How beautifully calm and still," said Theo, with a long look round.

"Yes, I wish Aunt Burtle were going to lie here," sighed Angel, "instead of being taken to that vault at Brompton. I think all mourners must feel different if their dear ones lie in a beautiful spot."

"What difference does it make?" said Theo, with a strange little smile. "We have still that terrible loneliness of being left behind; that ceaseless craving to be sure that they are happy; that weariness of hiding the ache which can only be borne alone."

"Yes, ours is the sorrow, dear, of course, but theirs the joy."

"In death, you mean?" questioned Theo, just as if she forgot they had been speaking of the dead.

"In death, of course," acquiesced Angel, remembering what a terrible experience of death Theo's had been when, before to-day, it had touched her own home and kindred.

"I remember," said Theo, "a grave I saw once in Shoreditch—I think it was—the epitaph was *Dr. Don's Best Bed-room*. I was a child then, but I believe I have thought differently of these—bed-rooms ever since."

"I fancy, from what you have told me, you are very fond of your churchyard at home, and Rex says the view from there is beautiful. Theo," Angel went on, presently, cogitating over her cousin's strange, fleeting pallor, "you are like me now, a clergyman's daughter—my dear, why do you start?—in a little village where you know every one, so you *must* have come sometimes—as I have done—face to face with death."

"I remember once," said Theo, dreamily, "a young widow died, and we took her little girl—a tiny child—to the rectory till friends should claim her. Next day when I came from the cottage, where I'd been laying flowers on her mother's coffin, the child came creeping up to me, and asked me in a whisper, 'Is it nice in Heaven?' I understood in a moment how, while I was away, some one had told her I was gone to see her mother, and she knew her mother was in Heaven—Angel, the very words are like a rest."

"There are better words for you, dear," Angel said, trying to rouse Theo to her ordinary mood, "for even now you can say your mother is on her way to you."

"I do say it every minute."

"Rex thinks she has decided most wisely and kindly, Theo. How good it was, too, of Mr. Sterne to ride into Lancaster at once to telegraph. I am glad he is coming with Aunt Helen, and that they go to London. It is far wiser to go to Onslow Square, as the funeral is to be there, and of course papa cannot arrive so soon as

they can, to be there when Dr. Wade and Rex go with the coffin to-night, and the servants. And to think that Aunt Helen will be there to receive us to-morrow is so good a thought. You don't forget that we have to go by the earliest express train, Theo."

"You mean we ought to be at home preparing?"

"I think so, dear. You see," said Angel, as they walked towards the gates again, "Hardy is rather confused to-day, and there are so many arrangements to make, and they may come again about the mourning, as they have to hurry so with what we need home to-night."

Both the girls knew how good it was for them to be busy, and so they accepted very little assistance from any maid, and did the chief of the packing themselves in solitude and in silence. Yet, before the early October sunset, all was completed, and they went into the drawing-room together, for the first time since Mrs. Burtle had been led in on Theo's arm the evening before. There was a cheerful fire, and they sat beside it, while beyond the shaded windows, the carriages rolled past, as they had rolled on other days; the loiterers in the garden laughed and read; and the scene beyond was gay and busy, the world going on its way, unmoved by their sorrows. Presently Rex Derham came in and sat with them, his very presence soothing them, though he talked very little, they all understanding each other's silence. At first Theo was by far the most silent, but when at last Rex told her how her stepfather had sent another telegram from Chester, to show that he and his wife were on their journey, and would certainly be in London before the arrival of the night train, adding warm words of praise for the thoughtfulness of his brother's friend, Theo rose a little in her chair, and, with fingers locked together, as if that stilled or hid the beating of her heart, she turned and spoke to Rex, as if she had forgotten Angel's very presence.

"I think you have never heard how kind he was to me—and to my mother—once. A terrible thing happened in a church where he was reading the funeral service——"

"I know," put in Rex, with a deep sympathy that amounted to suffering.

"I did not understand all that he had done until afterwards," Theo went on, in the same pained tone. "I knew he came himself to London that he might spare us the sorrow of hearing it unsoftened and suddenly; but the funeral had to be at night, and—outside the consecrated——"

"My dear, we know all this," sobbed Angel.

"And he did this," went on the steady, piteous voice, "himself; telling us nothing, only taking with him one of my father's clerks and his lawyer, because there were forms to be——"

"We know, dear," put in Angel, once again; but Rex answered nothing, knowing now how the girl had something she would say, and it was kind to let her say it.

"They had to identify the body. It was impossible to recognise it, because the shot had been fired so strangely that it made any recognition impossible—so purposely to destroy all recognition; and there was nothing left by which it was possible, except the forgotten name in the hat and gloves, and the two who knew him easily identified *those*. Then they traced his journey from his office the evening before, but it was not until afterwards that I heard of this village inquest. But Mr. Sterne was very kind beyond all this. He told us of a home possible to us in his own pretty, peaceful parish, where we might rest—mother and I. One sum given in charity would make this home ours, but when I asked this gift of the only one whom I could ask it was refused. Then somebody who owned this sum, and no more—*no more*—and who loved us, came with it in her hands and *made* me take it. It was Angel's gift, that home of ours; and can we ever repay her generosity, because she gave us all she had?"

"Oh, hush," pleaded Angel. "It was repaid me long ago, and it was so natural. You know I have been grateful to you ever since, Theo, for that one opportunity."

"You understand?" said Theo, wistfully questioning Rex. "You know how I owe my mother's happiness to Angel, and that, if even my life were needed for her happiness, I would give it. You understand, Rex?"

For an instant he was silent, his chest heaving with suppressed emotion, as for the first time she called him by his Christian name. Then he only answered very quietly, "I understand," for he could not utter that thought of his, "Who would not have done what Angel did?"

Then he turned the conversation in his easy, natural way, and talked to them of Mrs. Burtle; recalling hours they had all spent together, just as if the old lady, who would never join in any of their pleasures again, had been the source and spring of their enjoyment always; and just as if her memory beautified the hours they talked of, and which had been so precious to him as they passed.

Very willingly and gratefully Angel followed the prompting, but Theo sat quite silent; listening intently to the voices, caring little for the words.

But when he rose to go, and Angel said, "It is but a short good-bye, Rex," Theo smiled and offered both her hands.

"We never know," she said, "but for an hour, or a year, or a lifetime, we use the same word—*good-bye*."

When he was gone, Angel looked wistfully round the gloomy room.

"How empty the house feels now—Oh, Theo, don't! It does not sound right, indeed, at such a time." For Theo, in the dusk, was playing that pathetic little lied of Mendelssohn's which has been called "Regrets." "Hush, dear," whispered Angel; yet stood beside her in silence, until her hands fell from the keys.

"Theo, aren't you surprised that Monsieur Le Marchand has not written or left a card to-day?"

"No."

"Yet it looks strange, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Not—I don't like saying so, but—not as if all were open and honourable with him?"

"No."

The evening wore itself out at last. The girls had made a pretence of dining: then had wandered restlessly about the lighted house, until Hardy lured them to tea, pouring it herself to make sure of their taking it, and not leaving them until they were sitting before a cheery fire, talking just as usual—she thought. It was Hardy, too, who came at last, in her blunt, motherly way, to disturb them.

"Now, Miss Theo, go to bed, please. There's a splendid fire in your bed-room, and yours, Miss Angel, and the gas is lit up, and you've got to be up untimely. Go now, do."

When they rose obediently to bid each other "Good night," Theo took her cousin's face between her hands, and kissed it tenderly; then held it still, and looked lovingly, yearningly into the blue eyes.

"What do you see?" asked Angel, wondering.

"A life of happiness for you, and—many things. Angel, if you ever wonder over what I do, remember only—how I loved you."

"As if I ever could forget it, darling! How tired you look! Try to sleep. I'll come to awake you in the morning."

"What do you mean, Hardy? What does it all mean?"

Miss Sullivan had come, in the early morning, to arouse her cousin, and was gazing blankly round Theo's empty room, and at the bed, which had not been disturbed. Hardy was behind her, a little defiant in tone and bearing.

"Just what I say, Miss Sullivan. Miss Theo's gone, and we can't meddle, as she declined that way. 'E was a gentleman, every yard of 'im, though French isn't English, as I always say, and 'is first word to 'er when I 'eld the door to let 'er out, was

'My darling,' and the carriage there waiting, and it barely one o'clock. Don't you sob, Miss Angel—*What* is it you say? Oh, no, it's no disgrace; there's nothing disgraceful about it, though it's a pity the wedding won't be 'ere, for Miss Theo's too purty to be married in privation, just 'cause those French are 'alf savages; but she chose 'im, and, as she loved 'im best, she wasn't wrong-doing to go. Didn't she say to me with 'er own lips, 'Tell 'er'—that's you, Miss Angel—I go with 'im because I love 'im. I've chosen my life, and nothing could turn me from it now.'

"If I could be sure," sobbed Angel. "But he knows she has her fortune now, safely; and it looks so miserable. He ought to have waited to see Aunt Helen. Oh, how can I tell this to Theo's mother?"

"That's not for *you* to fret over, Miss Sullivan," said Hardy, with emphasis. "I've got a letter 'ere to give myself to Mrs. Sterne, and it'll tell 'er; Miss Theo never left that for you to do. No fear. She said to me with 'er own lips, when she came to my room so quiet, all dressed, to bring me down in a waterproof to chain the door be'ind 'er, 'Ardy,' she says, and she put the letter in my 'and, 'give it yourself to mother.' And after, as she was going away, and I a bit be'ind the door, 'cause those French are so sharp with their eyes, she just turned and kissed me! 'Give it yourself,' she whispered, 'and take care of Angel'—it's what she called you, Miss Sullivan—'till she's safe with mother,' and she said *mother* low and tender. I can feel 'er breath on my cheek now as she said it, and that was the last word before 'e put 'er in the carriage."

CHAPTER XIV.

"THROUGH THE SHADOWS."

"REX!"

Angel had been Rex Derham's wife for quite three months, yet she never entered his study without that wistful, almost apologetic utterance of his name.

They were living in the old Brighton home. It had been left to Angel, as the house in Onslow Square had been left to Theo, and she found she had grown so fond of it that when, a year after Mrs. Burtle's death, she was married, she begged her husband to make it their home for a part of every year, he travelling almost daily to his chambers in the Temple. It was fifteen months now since Theo had gone away, and still no tidings of her reached those whom she had left. The handsome income she inherited by

her grandmother's will was remitted, through the late Mrs. Burtle's solicitors, to a firm instructed by Theo, but from them no word could be elicited as to their client's address. They kept her secret effectually, and even the mother's pleading had been unavailing to win from them information they had been charged to withhold.

A few weeks after Angel's marriage, a little letter from Theo had been enclosed to her by these lawyers, bearing no address or postmark, telling how happy the news of the marriage had made her, and in words of simple, deep affection wishing every blessing for her and her husband. Angel had noticed how Rex turned away when she had offered this little letter to him, but when she left the room she did not take it with her, and though she would have guarded it as one of her valued treasures, she never asked her husband to give it back to her.

On that terrible day when she had had to tell Rex that Theo was lost to them, his anger and his misery had betrayed him; but the girl's single love grew only greater for him in his suffering, and when, months afterwards, he asked her to be his wife, and told her simply and honourably how he had loved Theo, she trusted him completely, and felt that through their married life there would be no secret now between them. And—as she used to tell herself so often and so trustfully—the fuller love would come.

It was no new thing to the young wife to surprise her husband deep in thought, as she found him now, yet always at the sound of her step or voice he would turn to meet her with a smile.

"Rex, I am going to call on the Eliots. Will you come for me?"

She asked it anxiously, and the love and yearning in the face lifted to his, might have gladdened any eyes; yet his were only calm and kind, and it was no wonder that the wife who loved him so devotedly missed something there.

"Is it not too warm to walk so far, dear?"

"There is a beautiful breeze, Rex, and it will be very cool presently. I thought it would not weary you."

Something in her voice struck him a little sadly.

"I will come, dear," he said, with readiness now. "I will leave at five."

"And until then?"

"I have writing."

"You were not writing when I came in."

"No."

"Rex," her blue eyes were troubled a little as they looked into his, "it is cruel of Theo's husband to keep her so long hidden

from us, but our regrets cannot bring her back, can they? And though I often think that you are trying to forget—Dear,” (something in his face had made her change the words she had been going to say) “do the trifling things I coax you into doing, in our life together, weary you? I know how you fulfil the greater duties, but these lighter ones I ask, do they weary you?”

“No, Angel.”

“Do I weary you with my love?”

“Oh, darling, no.”

“Do you ever regret the answer I gave when you asked me to share your life?”

“No, no! it was my only happiness.”

“Thank God! Then I can wait for the rest. I feel quite sure that it will come, the glad complete love which is to make my dear home dearer still. It will come.”

But the cry echoed differently in his own heart—“Will it come?”

CHAPTER XV.

THE EDGE OF THE SWORD.

ANGEL always walked swiftly when her mind was busy, and so rapidly now was she going along the King's-Road, that an elderly woman, who had been following her on the opposite side of the way, had hard work to cross the road and overtake her; then, walking beside her, had to touch her before she would look round. But the recognition was instantaneous when Angel turned.

“Hardy!” she cried. “Why, what a long time since I have seen you; never since Aunt Burtle's household was dismissed. Are you well, and are you living here?”

“I'm well, Mrs. Derham, thank you,” Hardy said, in the old, deliberate way, “and I'm not living 'ere, except for to-day. We came this morning, and we're going at present, I and my mistress. When you went to your own 'ome, after your aunt's death, Miss Angel, I went to live with Monsieur Le Marchand.”

“With Theo?” faltered Angel, starting visibly.

“Yes, Mrs. Derham, and I've a message from 'er, but I can only give it you in quietence. Will you come with me?”

“Of course I will, Hardy. Anywhere, for you to tell me of my cousin.”

So Hardy silently and stolidly led the way into the Aquarium, and up to the gardens on the roof; then turned away and went down the steps again. In her surprise, Angel paused, watching unconsciously a lady who came towards her, tall, and looking very slender in a simple black walking-dress. Then she felt the

colour rush to her face in a tide of strong emotion, and her two hands closed on Theo's.

"Why are you here, Theo? Why did you not come to me? Why did you let me meet you—here?"

"Because," said Theo, her face betraying how good it was to her to hear the dear familiar voice unchanged to her, "it is best. This meeting would make me like a baby, Angel, if there were no other eyes upon us! It is best here. Now," she said, as they sat down facing the sea, and Angel held her hand—her right hand—in silence; wondering, wondering over the change in her; "tell me of yourself—of yourselves, dear, that means now."

"Theo, have you been ill? You look so delicate, and you do not walk as you used to do."

"I am older," Theo said, with a loving touch upon the anxious face turned to hers. "Are you very, very happy, Angel? Perfectly, entirely, wholly happy? Oh, say it, and again and again; for I have come on purpose to hear that. How I have thirsted to hear it from your own dear truthful lips!"

The eager questioning of the eyes was even more piteous than the questioning of the lips, and Angel's filled with tears to see it.

"I ought to be," she faltered, with the truthfulness which Theo knew so well. "I should be happier than words could say, if only——"

"If!" repeated Theo, with a solicitude almost intense on the pale, beautiful face. "Don't say *if*. Your husband is good and noble, true and constant. You know it is so, Angel dear, so say it is—to me."

"He is more than that," said Angel, readily, "and oh, so kind to me! But there is something missing. I know it always. I miss it in his voice, in his eyes, in his touch. It would not be missed in some men, but I know what Rex could be. Theo,"—Angel's voice grew low and full of perplexity—"he changed when you went away. In his terrible sorrow at that time it was all clear to me, and I wondered how I could have been so blind. You did not guess, and so you are incredulous now," Angel went on, as Theo sat very still, looking far out upon the sea, in simple incredulity, as Angel thought; "but it is true; and afterwards—when he asked me to be his wife—he told me. I try now," she went on, her voice faltering less as she told her trouble, and not noticing that Theo had looked startled for the moment, "to forget and to think it has passed; and sometimes I feel that the love will come, but sometimes I fear it never can. Why should it? Is he not as true and steadfast in his nature now as when he loved you? And do I not know myself how hard such love is to uproot? I knew when I married him, Theo, so it was not his

fault; but I thought it would come. I think so still—oh, yes, dear, I'm not always so down-hearted as I have seemed to you. Perhaps it is because, now that I am with you, I feel how hard it would be for anyone to care for me after having loved you. But he loved me next to you; and I think he cared for me a little before he knew you; and so it may come right. He told me I could give him all the happiness possible for him now, and I have loved him so—even when I learned how he loved you. Oh, Theo, if you had known!"

"Once he did, possibly," was the sorrowful whisper, "but never again."

"What, Theo?"

"He will never," said Theo, her gaze still far away, and her low voice very calm and steady, "give me a place in his heart or thoughts after to-day. Where will he be this evening, Angel—your husband?"

"Why, at home, dear, with you, of course, and with me."

"I am going back to-day at five o'clock, Angel; but I must see your husband first. I only came just to look once upon your face, and see for myself your perfect content."

"Oh, Theo, you will stay with us. Don't say we are to separate so soon again. Theo dear"—softly, as if she might be speaking of the dead—"where is your husband?"

But Theo, looking still across the sea, did not hear.

"Theo, dear, tell me how it all is with you. I have so feared that Monsieur Le Marchand married you for your fortune."

"No, he did not," was the ready, steadfast answer.

"He did not care for your being wealthy?"

"That I do not know," said Theo, with a smile. "But he did not—as you said—marry me for my fortune."

"Oh, I am so thankful," Angel cried. "And he loves you as—as you should be loved, my Theo?"

"Yes; and he always will—as I love him."

"Oh, that is good! And here he is with you?"

"No; I came with only Hardy; just to see the old spots, and—most of all—to see you."

"That has set my mind at rest; still I shall miss you always, Theo."

"Come," said Theo, and when they left the Aquarium she called a cab, as if she were the one at home in Brighton, and Angel smiled to notice this; Theo answering the smile, though her face was strangely pale and thoughtful.

"You shall wait for me," she said, to the driver of the fly, when they had stopped before the doorway so familiar to her. "I shall want you to take me to the station in less than half an hour."

"Rex has our old sitting for his study," explained Angel, entering the house with her hand in Theo's. "He calls it his office. He will be there now, as he was not to leave home till five."

Almost as she spoke she tapped upon the door and entered, Theo following; her step was slow and steady, but it faltered a little when Rex looked up from his writing. Unconsciously he had raised his eyes straight and at once to her face, and looked — Ah! it was sad for Angel to see such a look! Then he rose, unsteadily as if a blow had struck him, and went towards her.

"Mr. Derham," she said, and stood quite still opposite him, "the longing to see Angel's face once more has overpowered me" — she said Angel's, but her beautiful, sad eyes never stirred from his, — "and I came back for one hour. Now I have seen her I am going again."

"Alone?" He had paused on his way, influenced unconsciously by her determination, and he uttered the brief questioning word almost breathlessly, pushing the loose hair from his forehead.

"Alone," she answered, very calm and still for all the fever burning in her eyes. "Who did you fancy would come with me?"

"Your husband," Rex said, his chest heaving as he stood so near her, yet apart.

"Angel," said Theo, very quietly, "will you go away?"

But Angel answered, "No," and clung to her and kissed her, as if she felt the time had come at last when Theo needed her.

"Then listen, dear," said Theo, with a gentleness whose bravery they could not understand. "I have no husband."

"Oh, Theo!" cried Angel, with a sob that burst from her heart irrepressibly, and whose meaning was half fear for what she did not know she even understood. "You did not tell me he was dead."

"Monsieur Le Marchand is not dead," said Theo, "he is in London now awaiting my return to him. But—" the brave, dark eyes were still upon Rex Derham's, while his now blazed with an awful passion in his haggard face—"he is not my husband."

"Did that devil——"

"How dare you!" broke from Theo's lips, but her voice seemed not to reach him.

"Did he take you away to——"

"You forget," she said, in a slow, pausing way. "I went with Monsieur Le Marchand of my own free will."

"Great Heaven! And you have ever since——"

"Been with him, yes," she answered, solemnly.

"And you can tell us this with—— Oh, my God! it is not true."

"Yes, it is true," she answered, steadily and safely now, with a new confidence, for who could read the truth she reiterated with such strange courage? I loved him so that I left you all and went with him, though I knew he had a wife living."

"Oh, Theo!"

It was Angel's horror-stricken cry that made her hands tremble in their grip upon each other.

"You understand?" she questioned, curbing the longing to put her arms about her cousin's neck and kiss her, just as if they were girls together, and the world held them equal. "Your contempt need not touch him, Mr. Derham, because I deserve it so much more. When I left my home here for his sake, I knew that he could not marry me. You understand?" she questioned again, as calmly as if she did not hear Rex Derham's panting breath. "I am ready to go now. I will never presume on my cousinship with Angel—" The words were addressed to Rex, whose eyes, in all their misery and passion, never left her face, while he battled fiercely with the truth—"but I had a childish longing to see her face once more, and I have seen it, and to know her perfect happiness, and I—shall know it. I am glad I have told you the truth at last. You know now what I have done, but you will never know how I was tempted. Angel, dear, don't cry. You will forget all this in your husband's love. No, I cannot refuse your kiss, dear, though I would never have asked you for it. Good-bye."

She had stooped for Angel's clinging, fearless kiss, and when she raised her eyes again, Rex sat at the table with his head buried on his arms. Then, with one lingering glance around the familiar room, and with a wonderful quiet courage in her face, she went.

In the wisdom of her love, Angel let three whole hours pass before she entered her husband's study, and to summon him to dinner, just as she would on any other day, brightly and naturally. But his greeting for her was different; as she knew and felt at once; and just what she had often longed for it to be. His eyes met hers without the want that had been there so long, and her own heart told her, in its first throb of gladness, that that want would never sadden them again. With a new silent tenderness he folded her in his arms.

"You have stayed long away from me, Rex," she shyly said.

"Yes; I have been breaking up old dreams—pitiful old dreams. Now I want you, Angel."

But she was silent, in the new delicious consciousness that he had taken her into the place she coveted, and where a memory had reigned so long.

"Angel, dear wife, I have something I must say to you to-night." But he paused then for so long a time, looking down into her candid, truthful eyes, that her question came involuntarily.

"You like me to be here, Rex?"

"I wonder what I shall ever like better."

"Better to-day than usual?"

"Better to-day than ever before, and to be better day by day through all the time to come."

"Oh, love," she whispered, trembling in her gladness. "I thought that it would come."

"Yes, it has come."

"But, Rex," she said, when he was silent once again, her voice sad in its entreaty, "you will not be cruel—in your thoughts—to Theo?"

"Cruel!" He spoke quickly in his pain. "Has *she* been cruel—but you cannot understand, my darling. I am thankful that you cannot understand. I wanted to tell you just this once how I have loved her, and then——"

"I know it, dear."

"No, you could not know; for I myself did not know until to-day. I feel that no words of mine could tell you how I have loved her; how I have cherished her memory and longed to rest my eyes upon the face I thought so pure and perfect. To be near her once again,—that has been the longing I have fought with, while, in my heart of hearts, I should have held my own true wife alone, as I can do to-night. Oh! love, oh! wife, forgive me."

"And now, Rex?"

"Now she has passed from my life, and the only brightness for me ever will be my wife's affection."

"And is that sufficient, Rex?"

"More than sufficient. It is all," he said; and there was truer, deeper meaning in the tone than in the words. "But can it be mine? Can you love me after this day?"

"If it were possible, I think I should love you even better, Rex; but it is not. I—I thought it would come."

"Yes, it has come."

CHAPTER XVI.

"WITH HEART AND HAND."

"AND you have believed this? For more than a year you have believed this of *Theo*—you who knew her?"

Captain Leslie asked the question with a passion he tried in vain to subdue, as he stood facing Angel Derham in her own drawing-room, a week after Theo's visit to Brighton.

"There was nothing else we could believe," Angel answered, sadly, "and it was Theo herself who told us that—what I've told you."

The one hour which Angel had so long been dreading had passed now, and the "Jack" whose return she had apprehended ever since Theo had left her, had—as she had known he would—demanded from her all she knew of her cousin's flight. She had always hoped it would be her husband Captain Leslie would see; yet now, through the misery of that hour, she had been grateful that Rex was in London.

"Theo herself!" echoed Jack. "She—but do you know her so little? Why, I must feel every man and woman round me mad, before I can *dream* such a wrong of Theo."

Angel sighed and turned to look from the window; though sea and shore and sky were all confused to her. It was so hard to undeceive anyone who took the truth as Captain Leslie did. Surely, surely he must know how pitifully true was all she said, yet he had denied it fearlessly, and even once had almost laughed contemptuously. And how ready, and even eager, he looked to go at once and prove his own thoughts true, and hers—a dream! Ah! if it were but all a dream! How much more unnatural, almost untrue, her story seemed since she had told it to this confident, bearded officer, who not only had laughed once, but had never, through this melancholy hour, had one shadow of doubt and mistrust in his heart. He had apologised for the laugh; he could not help it, he said, in his simple, straightforward way, because she had told a fable as the truth.

"I can see," he added, in the same confident way, "that it has been real grief to you—once—to believe what you have believed; and is perhaps grief still, but to me it is an utter impossibility."

"I suppose you have been to Theo's home, Captain Leslie?" inquired Angel, wistfully.

"Yes, and it was the same there. With all their love for her they too believed this *lie*."

"It is no lie," said Mrs. Derham, with unusual firmness,

because she grieved to feel how hard would be his awakening from this deep confidence in Theo.

"You think not. And—your husband?"

"Theo told us—in each other's presence—this sad truth."

"Theo told you!" he repeated, the ring of scorn in his voice making his gentle utterance of Theo's name sound strange. "She came herself to you, and yet you suspect *this*. She came herself to *tell* you—Great God! how wonderfully a man may be deceived!"

"There was no suspicion. Neither my husband nor I could ever have suspected Theo. But we did suspect Monsieur Le Marchand of interested motives in seeking her. And after we knew——"

"That will do. I understand," put in Captain Leslie, impatiently. "You have told me all, Mrs. Derham?"

"Quite all," said Angel, while the tears stood thickly in her eyes, "but you knew before, all that I have told you."

"And more," he answered, almost fiercely, "for I know that I shall find her just the Theo of the old dear days."

"If only it could be so—Ah! you are not going so hurriedly, Captain Leslie? Do stay with us a little. My husband will be so grieved if you do not."

"Stay here while—I beg your pardon," he hastily interrupted himself. "If I could stay with anyone it would be with you, but not one hour can I pause now in my search."

"You mean you will go to Monsieur Le Marchand's solicitors. You know the address?"

"Yes; I shall go there first."

"You will come back to us?"

"When I have found Theo."

Captain Leslie's visit to Monsieur Le Marchand's solicitors was as fruitless as Rex Derham's or Mr. Sterne's had been, but this—though it sorely disappointed him—did not for one moment turn him from his purpose. He walked as firmly and confidently from the lawyer's office as if his search were mapped before him, and its result a certainty; yet over the whole wide world there was no guiding hand to point, no whisper to advise or cheer. But he had hope and strong determination, and the two best helps of all, patience and power of thought. For days he hovered near these offices at the dinner hour, dining casually with one of the clerks, and wasting valuable hours in idle chat, to win one day just half a dozen words, which were possibly useless, and yet had possibly given the first faint clue. Putting it to the test at once, in his prompt way—yet warily in this new character of his

—he entered the solicitor's office next morning on other (and very needless) business, and, with affected carelessness, cast the die before he left.

"You scarcely need," he said, "have kept so secret the present dwelling of Monsieur Le Marchand. You little guessed I should meet my old friend in Paris soon afterwards. By the way, he seems to be having a pleasant time there, and I intend to join him again."

"He will probably have left," was the guarded answer, but Jack had caught a glance between the partners, and he needed no further corroboration of his guess. His heart beat rapidly this time he left the office, for his way seemed clear now that he had a clue, however slight. That night he was on his way to Paris, and there, day after day, he sought Theo, undeterred by disappointment and failure, and unconscious of fatigue in the patient pursuit of his one purpose. His handsome face grew worn and lined, but the bravery of his trust in her kept him alert and undespending. He wandered through the streets by day, and haunted the assemblies at night, and, when he felt he had searched every nook of Paris and its suburbs, he went on to other French cities, meaning to take them one by one; even then never losing for one hour the steadfast expectation that would only die with his death. Once or twice he was met by an old acquaintance, who would start, and pause, and turn; yet fear to betray a mistake by addressing this pre-occupied, haggard-looking gentleman as his genial fellow-officer, Jack Leslie. So weeks passed on, and Jack had just arrived in Rouen, and was standing thoughtfully looking along the street before entering his hotel—thinking, as he ever was, "If I could meet her here—" when he saw her.

CHAPTER XVII.

"LOVE'S HEAVY BURDEN."

CAPTAIN LESLIE never remembered anything of that walk, except the look of the slight, black-robed figure he followed, his gaze never leaving it, as if his eyes, after so long thirsting for this, could not let it go. And when Theo had entered a small, white house, quite a mile from the city, Jack followed her still, and not until he had been taken in to her—at once, as if the earnestness of his purpose were patent—did he feel with a sudden quahn that they should not have met unprepared. He stood and looked at her in a silence of intense emotion, when she had turned to face him; but when he saw the rich, soft

colour flow into her pale face, he started forward, and, in his grave, natural way, took her hands in his, and laid his lips upon them.

"Jack!" she cried, with a gladness in her loving eyes which made the returning pallor more pathetic. "Oh, Jack, *you?*" Then, with the thoughtful lowliness only acquired in solitude and suffering, she corrected herself. "Captain Leslie, have you heard of my unworthiness?"

"Dear, have you been ill?" he asked, as if his thoughts had not gone further yet.

"No, I have had no illness, though I feared it. Hardy takes care of me. You remember Hardy? You have heard of my going away?"

"I have heard all they could say; yes, my dear, and now I have come to hear what you have to tell me, for that is all I shall believe."

"You heard, and yet you came to find me, and do not despire——"

"Hush, dear! I will not hear such words of you and me. It is no new thing for me to long for you, and, if I had not found you, I would have—died in the search."

"Oh, Jack!" The cry burst from her unawares. "I can tell you now—at last. But—are they well—at home?"

"As well, dear, as they can be while sorrowing for you."

"If I had died," said Theo, softly, "they would have been happy now. They could not have mourned so long. But—now they would not have me back."

"You will see," Jack said, in that confident, straightforward way of his, "because you are coming with me. I'm going to take them what they long for most. Dear, are you alone here?"

"Yes," she answered, simply and sorrowfully. "Monsieur Le Marchand is dead. You wonder," she went on, noticing the slow dusky colour rise in Captain Leslie's bronze face, "how I can mention him to you. I want to tell you. You were his friend once, as you were mine, and I am grateful to remember that—now. I left Brighton with him nearly two years ago, and never left him till—he died—a month ago. I kept this out of the papers. You will understand—Jack, this is his photograph, the only one I have. It was taken when—when you knew him."

"Theo," cried Jack, hoarsely, when he lifted his eyes from the locket she had given him, "what can you mean? This is your father."

"My father, yes," she said, her own face now scarcely paler than his. "My father, Jack; an exile from his own country; afraid of his old name; avoiding recognition; and an alien from

us. May I tell you his story—I'm not faint, and I shall not be happy till you know, you who have found me, and given me the first hope. You will keep my secret, I know; you were so true always."

"Tell me all, Theo," he whispered, with a great tenderness in his steadfast eyes. "I will keep any secret for you, if it be right to keep it."

"If it be right!" she repeated. "I could not think of that, I never do. I thought it best for—mother; that was all. And best for—others. The dear Fräulein always was sorry that I had no higher guide for my actions—Ah! you remember, Jack?"

"Don't tell me more to-day, dear," he entreated, his heart throbbing to see her so calm, and yet looking so ill.

"Yes, please—now. He could not take his own name, Jack. He dared not let anyone recognise him, and mother was so happy. It was different from her old life; so fresh and pure and helpful. Oh, don't say how wrong it was, Jack. Could you—could anyone—have told her? Because he could not make it public. Nobody could know. Only I could know, and oh, how I thought and thought, and there was only one way they could all be happy! And father only wished for me, and he had to hide, and I wanted—wished it too. We had each other, Jack. Was it so wrong?" she asked, a terrible perplexity on her wan face, while she still defied her weakness. "Often and often in solitude I have felt it was so, and suffered—ah, so much! Then I would remember they are happy, mother and Angel, and—now Rex. I—I am getting sleepy, Jack, and I have so much to tell you. Don't look so sadly at me. I am well, I have been always well; only dazed a little, as I often am. Hardy used to fancy—I mean she often fancies I'm going to fall ill, but I never did. He always liked me with him, and he would not if I'd been sickly. I—I will try not to be so dull in telling you, Jack. You are so patient with me. You always were. My father left his office that night—you remember? It was the day you bade me good-bye—and he wandered about all that night, and in the early morning got into a train for Liverpool, for he had always meant to go to America. At the very first station where they stopped, there came into my father's carriage—empty before—a man he knew—and you and I knew, Jack. Never mind his name, for he was the real cause of my father's ruin, and, if he suffered ruin as complete as ours, he had only himself to blame. From what he said, father saw that he had followed him for hours, and come by this train to confess to father before—before—do you understand me, Jack? He had determined to take his own life, and had prepared, destroying all possible trace, and intending,

he said, to make recognition impossible. It was then the thought entered my father's mind that he could make his own flight unsuspected. He had remembered how his name was openly written in his hat and gloves, and he saw that in his companion's excitement no trifling act of his would be observed, so he changed the hat and gloves, and at the next station left that train, taking the next fast one straight to Liverpool. You know—you have heard the rest, Jack! You know how the dead man's face was unrecognisable, but how the hat and gloves identified him to all seeming, and how he was traced from his office the night before into that empty carriage. And father really was safely then on board. Oh, Jack, if he had only returned *before* mother's marriage. He came to Brighton—disguised, you have heard, as Monsieur Le Marchand—to see whether his mother could tell him of us, and he saw me. I—I knew from the first he was interested in me, and I wondered; and one night—it was at the Aquarium—he told me, and then, oh, Jack, what could I think of except sparing them? And then Angel could——”

“How could it affect Angel?”

“Angel!” she echoed, pushing the hair from her dazed eyes. “Did I say Angel? Mother was so happy, Jack. So happy! And her little son is so dear to her. You see, father could not claim her—dare not, ever, and oh, the nights were so troubled then, Jack, while I wondered, I mean I dared not think in the day, while they were with me. Was I wrong, Jack? You will know. Mother will know. I did not. He was my own father, and he had to sacrifice—why do you look at me so?”

“I was only thinking, dear,” he said, though he had thought many other things, “how good a day it will be when I take you home again.”

“Home? To mother? Oh, Jack, I dare not. I could not keep my father's secret, if I saw her.”

“No,” he answered, gravely, his brows knit with pain to think what the keeping of this secret had been to the girl; of the life of concealment for the father and daughter; and most of all Theo's bearing suspicion from those she herself could love so intensely. “Have you friends here?” he asked, involuntarily, as he pictured her life.

“No, we could not make friends. Remember how my father was changed, and what a rest it was to him to drop his disguise. But,” Theo added, with her old, bright smile, “many people have been kind to us, and Hardy is such a comfort.”

“For quite long enough,” Jack said, “the burden of this secret has been borne alone, and the loneliness is slowly killing

you. Does any plant live when shut from the sun? You have not only exiled yourself from those you love, but you have known that they believe a lie of you. Oh, my Theo, it is in my hands now, and you have only to rest. We shall soon be at home, and the dear mother——"

"Oh, Jack, no," came the piteous cry once more. "You are stronger than I, and, if you say it, I am afraid. Leave me here. It is safer for me here. They must not know. I owe Angel so much. It was all she had, and she gave it so willingly, so lovingly, and I never can repay it—What, Jack? They must know? Oh, no. The old home at the rectory is so blest, and if they know—I—Oh, Jack, I cannot see you. Am I fainting?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"THE DEAD PAST"

"ARE they come?" the rector cries, letting the lawn gate slam behind him in his eagerness to ask this question, as Angel comes quickly from the house to meet him, holding by the hand his little boy, and chatting with May and Elsie, their cheeks aglow and their eyes bright with expectation.

"Not yet, papa," the answer comes, "but from the paddock we can see a horse."

"And horseman," Angel adds, "and he looks like Rex, but I don't know how that can be."

"I do, my dear," the rector answers, cheerily. "When I reached the manor I sent my horse on to the station by one of the squire's men, fearing the carriage would be filled, and not wishing anyone to walk."

"Except yourself," says Angel, in her ready, appreciative way. "And how fast you must have walked, Mr. Sterne!"

"Yes; I was so fearful of not being at home before them. I could not hurry away from the sick-room, of course, but I certainly could upon the way. Though the poor squire's illness prevented my going to France for Theo and your aunt, I was determined to be here to meet them. Your husband has been a famous substitute for me upon the journey, but I felt that even *you* could not be so here. What a good fellow he was to so promptly and willingly—more than willingly—do that for me, and for my wife, and for Theo!"

"And," adds Angel, smiling the old, sweet smile, "for himself."

Then there is a shout from the little girls who stand upon the

turf bank watching, and the gate is fastened open, and Mr. Sterne notices that Angel's cheeks flush and her eyes dance, as if this were a lover riding so swiftly towards her, and not a husband of nine whole months.

"They are coming," Rex Derham cries, when he catches sight of the watching faces, as if his coming were nothing save as a herald; but his eyes, when they fall upon his wife, hold a silent, precious greeting which she understands.

"They will be here in precisely ten minutes," he goes on presently, smiling at everybody's excitement, while he himself obliviously shakes hands a second time with the rector, holding Angel's right hand fast in his left.

"Ten minutes!" echoed Angel, and turns and flies to the house, once more to step through the open window and see that the long flower-laden table holds everything that Theo likes; and, to her husband's great astonishment, scarcely noticing that they follow her. The thought and care that Angel has expended on this one meal would have sufficed for quite a hundred meals, and the thought and care seem still unending.

"You are to dispense with dinner," she says to Rex, far too deeply burdened with responsibility to turn and look at him. "It would weary Theo, we think, after her journey, to sit through any ceremonious meal of different courses; and perhaps—after such an illness—she will fancy just what we should not guess; so it is all laid at once, and tea will seem homely and uncereemonious and lazy—as Mr. Sterne did not mind."

Mind! Why, the rector is going round and round the table now, like a boy, to be quite sure that Theo's favourite fruits are here in their perfection, and everything she used to like; for not one of her tastes or whims or fancies is forgotten by those who love her so well, and have lost her for so long.

"Does it look right, Rex?"

"There must be more roses," he answers, in a glad, prompt way, "and an especial one in Theo's place. Then it will be perfection."

"My dear," the rector says, as he passes out again through the open window, his boy now on his shoulder, his own face as beaming as the child's, in spite of the grey hairs, "you have done yourself the greatest credit to-night. Indeed, all the while your Aunt Helen has been away, you have quite taken Theo's old place."

"Rex, have I?" she whispers, as they two follow, and he understands the earnestness of her tone.

"Taken Theo's old place? Indeed you have, my darling wife. Now for the roses."

"I declare," the rector says, when they join him at the gate, "everyone passing stops to ask for Theo. What is it in the girl that has made everyone love her?"

"Perhaps," suggests Angel, gently, "her own great power of loving." And Rex knows, though he says nothing; for sometimes he feels one reason no one else can feel for Theo's deception, remembering how she had said, on that last day, "if even my life were needed for her happiness, I would give it." Then the questioning earnestness of that appeal direct to him, which was so strange from Theo's lips, "You understand, Rex?"

A thousand times had he recalled the words, simply because it was the only time she had ever called him by this name, but they have borne a deeper meaning since he has met Captain Leslie in France, and the memory of them now can bear no touch from others.

Before anyone has noticed how grave the young man's face has grown, the carriage comes slowly through the gate, and, though they all run with it up the sweet old rectory garden, even the children now forbear to utter their delight aloud, and curb as they can the excitement which has grown almost unbearable.

So, on Theo's coming home, there is no glad exclamation such as welcomed Rex; no rush of the children to her arms as it used to be even when she came from the village; but from all—Ah such a greeting!

And, if the mother has tears in her eyes when she stands back to let them welcome Theo first, the tears make her smile none less glad and tender afterwards when she herself puts her arms round her child, and gives her a wordless welcome only the mother's heart could give.

Though the change in Theo is so plain to those who love her, they all think her beauty greater, sweeter, truer than it had ever been, though they do not know, of course, that, while the brilliant colour of old times may come again, there will never come again that fatal brilliancy in the eyes which told how the girl recklessly, feverishly, defied her own suffering.

In her new peace and happiness, it is to Captain Leslie Theo turns when her heart is fullest. And even here, where everyone would serve her, she feels still the care that he has given her since they met; a care so womanly in its tenderness, so manly in its whole devotion.

They none of them, except the children, will ever talk of this day afterwards; but, when in memory they look back upon it, they will not see the sorrows and perplexities of the dead past, because it will shine as the fair, sweet dawn of a new life.

UNDER LIFE'S KEY.



CHAPTER I.

ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER.

THE boat, with the three young figures in it, glided past just as the squire and his sister-in-law reached the river bank, and they stood to watch it, he waving his hat, she following the skiff with her eyes, in rather a stern and rigid silence. The squire was standing out in the June sunshine, his handsome head uncovered, while Miss Macnair stood in the shadow of the limes, and it was plain that her forty years sat more heavily upon her than the squire's five-and-forty sat on him, and that the moody shadow had by long continuance become habitual to her grave hard face. So they stood watching, as the boat passed smoothly and noiselessly on its way. One young man lay idly in the stern, the other rested on his oar, while he tried to teach their companion the skilful management of hers. A turn in the river hid the two groups from each other, then the squire turned with an inexplicable sigh. Miss Macnair heard it distinctly, and remembered it for a long time.

"Nora Carleton," she remarked, as her brother-in-law joined her, "has no steadiness of purpose, for only yesterday I heard her tell the boys she should never row with them again."

"She likes to enliven them with such threats as that," laughed the squire. "By those means (and others) she keeps them in subjection."

"Her nature is hopelessly unstable, and her manners childish. But," added Miss Macnair, with slow emphasis, "she is still a child, so perhaps we may hope for amendment."

"She is nineteen, Caroline, how can you call her a child?"

There was a note of eagerness, even wistfulness, in Mr. Sutton's voice, and his sister-in-law was quick to mark it.

"Some girls," she said, "are so much younger and less thoughtful

for their years than others are. "My own dear sister at nineteen was a perfect woman in gravity and stability."

"She was indeed," assented the squire, but he made no effort to enlarge upon the merits of the late Mrs. Sutton.

The beautiful estate of High Sutton had not, so it was whispered, been made a home of unruffled bliss for its master during its late mistress's reign, and, though his twin sons had never heard one word of aught save respect uttered either to or of their mother, they were both vaguely conscious that it would take far more even than their aunt's hard and suspicious temper to make High Sutton the unhome-like abode which it must have been in their mother's life-time. It was perhaps this very consciousness which made Mr. Sutton so gentle in dealing with his second son, who inherited his mother's jealous, gloomy temperament. So ever-conscious was he of the misery of it for the young man himself, that it was not in seeming only that he was kinder to the morose and silent lad than to the elder brother (elder only by twenty minutes), who possessed his father's genial nature, and that thorough sincerity which precludes the possibility of suspicion.

But it was not of the squire's "twin lads" Miss Macnair was thinking as she and her brother-in-law strolled away from the river. It was of a theme far more conducive in her mind to uneasy speculation. Unfathomable as are the unuttered thoughts of one's companion, Miss Macnair's might have lain clear as daylight before the squire by the utterance of her first remark.

"Nora is reckless, and volatile, and flippant."

"Sum it up in a word, Caroline," put in Wynter Sutton, pleasantly. "Say Nora is Irish."

"I wish she had stayed in Ireland."

"You do not mean what you say," was the quiet rejoinder to this unpremeditated flash. "Nora's mother was the early and constant friend of my wife and yourself. What could you do less than ask her here, and be kind to her, now that she is motherless like our own lads?"

"Not much like our own lads," returned Miss Macnair, pleasantly appropriating the plural pronoun. "*Her* father is—why, he and Nora are like two senseless children at home at Baggalley, and the whole estate is going to ruin as fast as it can. It never was worth much either. Nora must feel the difference when she is here."

"I hope she does," said the squire, while a pleasant light shone in his eyes.

"I mean, of course, in the boys' vacation," continued Miss Macnair, looking straight on before her; "but, for my own part, I don't like her manner of being so thoroughly at home, even with

them." "I do. While so young, at any rate, she need not be hemmed round with ceremonious stiffness. I'm sure the boys think of Nora as they would of a pet sister."

"I don't like it," exclaimed Miss Macnair, with inexplicable rapidity. "They are *not* brothers and sister, so why should they behave as such?"

"Let the subject drop, Caroline," remarked Mr. Sutton, with a tone of pain in his quiet voice. "Nora is your guest here, and a motherless girl who has not learnt so much perhaps as other girls have learnt; we seemed just then to have forgotten that. By the way, it is time they had landed and overtaken us."

"They stay too long on the river, I think," observed Miss Macnair, turning stiffly to look behind her. "I'm always nervous about the Fall."

"Nervous about danger a mile away," was the laughing response. "Why, even Ernest and Drury do not row below the boat-house, unless it may be a few yards, to moor their boat in the shadow as they fish. You must own, Caroline, that they know how to use their oars, and are both prudent, as well as obedient lads."

"But there is Nora."

"Nora again," laughed the squire. "Her curiosity often leads her to the Fall on *terra firma*, I know, but not on the water, Caroline. I believe she would be terrified at going within sight of it in the boat, even if not forbidden."

"I would not like to trust her if any whim seized her."

At that moment a rushing sound reached them from behind, and presently, in the grass beside them, three of whom they had been speaking darted past in a race. Nora Carleton first, hatless, but with roses twined in her dishevelled hair, her eyes radiant, and her cheeks pink. Then Ernest, gaining upon her, his slight well-knit figure bent a little, and a merry smile upon his face. Last, Drury running steadily, with his brows drawn and his elbows planted firmly at his sides.

"Well done, Nora," cried the squire, as they passed; "look to your laurels, Dru. They must leave off giving Nora a start," he added, merrily, as they passed out of hearing. "She will beat them both."

As of course she did, waving her hat in triumph, while she sat on the low fence which stopped their race.

"You ran splendidly, Nora," said Ernest, fanning himself with his straw hat, as he lay upon the grass beside her. "I must never boast again of my celebrity at Oxford."

"Are you celebrated at Oxford too, Drury?" asked the girl, balancing herself deftly upon the rails.

"Not in that line," put in his brother. "Dru excels more in skilful than muscular pursuits. He favours whist and billiards."

Nora, from her unsteady seat, chanced to be looking into Drury Sutton's face, when his eyes met hers.

"There are times," he said in his heavy tones, and as he spoke he drew his handkerchief lightly across his face, "when men need sports which do not heat or weary them—how intense the heat is here! But Ernest talks rubbish. No young fellow of twenty could stand the chance of being beaten by the practised players whom of course one must meet there—would meet, at least, if one went in for the thing at all."

"Then you lose the games, as you lost this race?" asked Nora, her eyes clear and bright again, as that inexplicable shade left Drury's face.

"I am not a fool," the young man muttered sullenly, as he crossed the fence. But in a moment his tone changed, and he turned and gave his hand to Nora, with a smile.

"I'm coming," she cried, putting on her hat hastily and preparing to spring from the fence. "Let's go and gather cherries now. You two shall climb and gather, and I'll catch and eat. That's a nice arrangement, isn't it?"

"An excellent one," cried the squire, joining them just as Nora alighted on the grass beside Drury, and Ernest followed at her summons. "A fair division of labour indeed."

"Did you see me wave my hat, Mr. Sutton?" asked the girl, turning gladly at the sound of his voice, and linking her hand in his arm with a familiarity which greatly quickened the regular breathing of Miss Macnair. "That was to show I had won the race."

"You had a far too good a start, little lady. I wouldn't have allowed it, if I had been either of the lads."

"But you aren't either of the lads, I'm glad to say. Now suppose we have a race, you and I, Mr. Sutton; we'll run to the cherry orchard, and start in a line, to further the ends of justice. Miss Macnair, will you start us, please, awfully fairly?"

"*Awfully* is not a word to employ as you employ it, Nora," began Miss Macnair—"you particularly, in whom nothing and nobody inspire any awe at all."

"Oh, I always forget!" cried Nora, tossing back her dishevelled hair. "Papa uses it too, so perhaps it's a manner and custom of the Irish. We often laugh at each other, yet we never remember to cure ourselves."

"It *should* be cured," rejoined the elder lady, impressively.

"All in good time," put in the squire, when he saw the shy colour rise in the girl's cheeks. "I'm ready, Nora. One, two, three—away!"

Words would fail in describing the rigid displeasure of Miss Macnair's countenance as the two figures fled, followed by her nephews, laughing heartily, and cheering when the squire (using his reserved strength after his antagonist had exhausted hers) covered the last few yards with marvellous rapidity, and turned with triumph to meet Nora as she came up panting and flushed, but laughing too.

"Beaten, Nora—unmistakably and ignominiously beaten."

"It is better to race with you," said the girl, speaking to the young men as demurely as her failing breath would allow; "you are far more easily conquered."

"Is it so?" asked the squire, laughing still, but gazing with a steady, almost questioning gaze into the young face. "I'm very sorry!"

"Now for the cherries!" cried Nora, noticing neither words nor glance. "Who is going up the tree? I'm ready to catch."

"All right," cried Ernest, swinging himself to the lowest branches. But, in spite of his agility, Drury's heavier limbs obtained the surer support, and when Nora, holding her skirt spread for the fruit, looked up laughingly to say she was ready, they were Drury's eyes which met hers through the leaves. Down pattered the cherries into her dress, hitting sometimes her shoulders or her hand, and at others clinging to her hair, or touching her merry upturned face, while the squire stood a little apart watching her.

It was just as Miss Macnair came towards the tree, and her eyes, still with the jealous hardness in them, took in the whole scene, that there was a crash over Nora's head, and a shower of leaves upon the girlish waiting figure. In one moment the squire, his face white as death, had closed his arms about the slender form and drawn it away, while the heavy bough fell just where Nora had stood. Drury, saving himself with a spring, alighted, and in eager nervousness began to apologise to Nora for having heedlessly trusted his weight above her.

"I forgot," he said, his face flushing duskily, "that it was less safe for me than it would have been for Ernest."

"I was not frightened," said Nora, her wondering gaze upon the squire's face, though she was answering Drury with an effort at a smile. "Indeed—indeed I was not frightened."

And yet even Miss Macnair could see that *something* had now startled the girl beyond words.

"Never mind, Nora," cried Ernest, beginning to gather up the fruit, which had all fallen to the grass. "The cherries are not hurt. Sit down now and enjoy them after your panic."

But though she took a few, as he handed them to her, she did not even raise them to her lips.

"I thought you were so fond of cherries," remarked Drury, watching her curiously.

"Yes, I am," she said, but still they were left untasted, and still that look of surprise and bewilderment lingered in her eyes.

"Won't you have a few, Aunt Caroline?" inquired Ernest, his slight figure intercepting her stony gaze.

"No," Miss Macnair answered, curtly; and Ernest, like every other member of the little group, was aware of some new feeling having crept among them.

"Wasted spoil," said the squire, with a carelessness it was evidently difficult to affect. "Come, boys, let us rescue it; we shall enjoy it after dinner."

Perhaps the squire was longer over the task than he need have been; at any rate, when he rose, he and his sister were alone beside the cherry-tree.

"Ernest said he would fetch a basket," remarked Miss Macnair, in a grim tone, as the squire looked round uncomfortably. "And Drury, I suppose, has gone to seek Nora. *She*," added the lady, emphatically, "has *of course* left?"

"Yes," assented the squire, with a nervousness which was new to him, "I suppose so."

"I have had a great shock, Wynter," continued his sister, apparently shrinking from the confidence which she volunteered. "I hope I may have been mistaken in the conclusion your conduct forced upon me. I should deeply regret your having ever given Nora Carleton reason to believe that——"

"The conclusion which has shocked you is a just conclusion, I daresay, Caroline," returned Mr. Sutton, a smile breaking upon his handsome face. "You see I don't pretend to misunderstand you. I am going to ask Nora to be my wife."

For a long minute Miss Macnair stood to regard her companion in speechless wonder, and then only four words passed her tightened lips.

"You must be mad!"

The squire's smile faded.

"Sometimes I think I am," he said, with gravity, "and sometimes I know not what dreams of happiness possess me, in spite of my grey hairs."

"A fool's paradise," was the muttered retort.

"Possibly," said Wynter Sutton, very sadly; "if so, it will soon have faded."

"Then you mean to tell Nora of this ridiculous infatuation? If it were one of your own boys speaking so, Wynter, I could believe it. There would be something a trifle more suitable in an

attachment between Nora and one of them; and, indeed, I think there is such an attachment."

If Miss Macnair had fancied that last blow would change the squire's plans she speedily became aware of her mistake.

"If it be so," was the quiet rejoinder, "my lads will find their father do his best to help them on to happiness."

Then he was gone, and his sister-in-law was left to wonder, and to fret alone.

"What absurdity!" she muttered, as she impatiently started to leave the orchard. "A girl who might be his daughter, and who has, I daresay, looked upon herself often in the light of his daughter-in-law. It would be a little less intolerable even if she were an English girl; they are older for their years, and more sedate. Nora is, in some matters, a perfect baby, and I'm sick of Wynter's reiterated assertion that she is a true woman, in spite of her random ways. Wait until he tries her; for there is no chance, however slight, of his being refused the opportunity of trying her as his wife. The idea of a girl who has been used to the irregular poverty of Baggalley refusing the master of High Sutton, especially as she is vain enough to know the influence she would possess! The idea is altogether hateful to me."

A fact which would have been plainly evident to anyone who could have seen the gesture of repugnance with which Miss Macnair dismissed the thought.

As Mr. Sutton left the orchard he met his elder son, and answered cheerily his question as to where Nora could be.

"I don't know, my lad. I should have fancied you could tell me."

"No; she sent us off—said she was tired of us both." And Ernest turned back towards the house, whistling softly as he strolled along the grass.

"Tired of them both!" whispered the squire to himself. "She was joking, of course."

The cherry-orchard stood on the hill-side, and at its foot the squire came suddenly upon Nora, leaning on the rails which separated it from the river. Her thoughts were so far away that she did not even hear the approaching footsteps; and so, when Mr. Sutton paused beside her, she did not turn. He stood for a few moments in silence, not unwillingly, with the vague feeling that this time of uncertainty might be sweeter than the time to follow, when he should have learned the truth.

But presently she turned her grave eyes from their distant gaze, and saw him.

"Have Ernest and Drury gone in, Mr. Sutton?"

"Yes," he answered, with a smile. "Was it not natural when you told them you were tired of them both?"

Then she smiled too, and turned to leave the orchard.

"And you are tired of their father, Nora?" he asked, standing before her so that she must pause.

"No," she said, and turned and dropped her hands once more upon the rails, standing demurely patient, as if he had bidden her stay.

"Nora," said the squire, gravely, "I am come to tell you why my manner startled you when I thought you in danger half an hour ago."

He saw her under-lip quiver a little, and her eyes droop in their gaze, but he could not guess with what an effort the girl tried to understand this vague new consciousness which possessed her.

"I was not frightened," she said again, as she had said to Drury. "I had no time to fancy there was danger."

"Nor had I," said the squire, earnestly. "I had no *fancy*. It only came naturally to me to save you, Nora, because you are so precious to me; not only as my boys' pet, and the child of my old friend, but, most of all, as my own love."

A moment's pause, while the young face paled as he had never seen it pale before; then he turned to her, with his hands outstretched, appealingly.

"Nora, I love you so dearly, in spite of the wide difference in our ages, that I am come to pray you to be my wife."

Very quietly she laid her hands in his.

"Can it be?" she asked, in her soft, bewildered tone. "Can you care for me in—in that way?"

"It was because I cared for you so very much *in that way*, love," he said, "that I betrayed myself before them all, and to yourself just now. Tell me if you can ever care *in that way* for me."

"I cannot believe it," she whispered, while he held her beside him.

"It is very easy to believe, my child," he answered, in his grave, kind tones. "Almost in the very first hour you spent in my house I learnt to love you, Nora. I saw the true, brave, tender heart through all the merry, daring habits. How could I help loving you, my pretty, bright, true-hearted child?"

"Hush!" she said, gently, and in her quaint, new gravity. "I am not what you think me. I must go back to my father, please, Mr. Sutton."

"Indeed you shall," he whispered, with a caress, which was as earnest as it was rare with him. "I shall take you myself, that I may win his consent to bring you back. After that, Nora, you shall make me take you to see him as often as ever you like. Only just say that this shall be your home, and that you will teach yourself to love me *in that way*. For if you feel you could not,

darling, it would be kinder to tell me so. A disappointment now would not be what it must be after I have learned to believe in a future which seems almost too happy to be possible."

"But why," she asked, while no shadow from the coming years fell over her glad face, "impossible to you, in whose power it lies to make so many people happy?"

"You, Nora?"

"Yes," she whispered, softly, "I am always happy here, and—and now I know why."

Miss Macnair had dressed, and was sitting in the drawing-room, with a feeling of great injury upon her, when Mr. Sutton and Nora came in together. One glance told her everything, but nothing in her manner betrayed this, as she waited grimly for what her brother-in-law might say.

"Caroline, Nora has promised to be my wife."

Quietly as he spoke, Miss Macnair could see what strong emotion stirred him, and she was forced to acknowledge to herself that, since the time when, little more than a boy himself, he had come to woo her handsome, self-willed sister, she had never seen such a light of happiness shine in his frank, kind eyes. The chilly words died upon her lips, and she even kissed the girl who came so shyly to her side.

"I hope you will be happy," she said, mechanically.

"Miss Macnair," Nora whispered, in the earnest simplicity that belonged to her, "I would not for the world come to be Mr. Sutton's wife so ignorant, and wild, and inexperienced as I am now. I shall go home at once and papa will help me, and I will study a lot of things, and keep house myself, and go over the estate with papa. And," she continued, unconscious of her listener's scornful mental comparison of "the estate" with High Sutton, "I shall soon improve because I am so anxious to do so."

"I hope so," rejoined Miss Macnair. "Now it is time to dress."

Obedient to the hint, Nora left the room; then Miss Macnair turned to her brother-in-law with her eyebrows elevated.

"For your own sake, Wynter, I'm sorry you were not a poor man to-day."

"Why?" was the cheery question, though a shadow fell unconsciously over the squire's face, because he comprehended her full meaning.

"Because you would have been better able to test your chance of future happiness. No one could dream that, under *any* circumstances, a girl of Nora's age and temperament would refuse such a position as you have offered her."

"Under any circumstances, eh?" repeated the squire, laughing. "That isn't an encouraging insinuation, Caroline."

"And marriages never turn out happily where there is so great a disparity in age."

"Only an aphorism, perhaps; but I shall be late for dinner, if I wait to combat it."

Not that that was Mr. Sutton's real reason for hastening away, he knew well that this must be a trying hour for his late wife's sister, whose memory could recall so forcibly the disappointments and chills of his early married life, and beyond that he wished to speak to Ernest and Drury.

Half an hour later, as Nora walked down the long corridor from her own room, softly and slowly, enfolded in her new happiness, Mr. Sutton met her and drew her towards him at one of the low windows.

"Nora, I have told the boys," he said, with a great delight in his tones. "You should have heard Ernest's loud Hurrah!"

"And Drury?" she questioned.

"Drury is a quieter lad," replied the squire, with a perceptible change of tone, "and he did not so noisily express his delight at the thought of having you here for ever. Oh, my love, what a happy change it will be for us all!"

She was looking from the window near which they stood, but, when he ceased speaking, her eyes came slowly back and fixed themselves wistfully upon his face.

"I wonder," she said, "if it *will* be so—a happy change for us all?"

"My darling, can you doubt it?"

"I never did until that moment," she softly answered; "but then a sudden fear came over me."

"And you are trembling still. What brought this wild and unnatural fear, my love?"

"Nothing could have brought it, for when it darted into my mind, making things look dark which an instant before had seemed so beautiful to me, you were only speaking of Ernest and Drury."

CHAPTER II.

ADRIFT.

THREE years have passed since the squire of High Sutton brought his young bride from Ireland, and these three years have passed in perfect happiness for both. So bent had Nora been upon preparing herself for conscientiously taking upon her new responsibilities, that, to study indefatigably under her father in the Irish home in which order and method had been ever strangers.

she would have delayed her marriage month after month, on the ground of not being sufficiently improved. But her father pleaded as well as her lover, and won her consent at last, urging his own failing health and great desire to see her in her real home.

Upon this summer evening, when we next see Nora at High Sutton, her father has been dead almost two years, and the little Connaright estate is offered—vainly—for sale. The twins are at home for the long vacation now, tall and stalwart young men, but with still the old contrast, both in face and manner; Ernest frank and active, Drury silent, watchful, and inert. There has been no change at all in Ernest's manner to Nora during these three years, but sometimes she fancies Drury is impatient with her, and that he winces at any reminder of their relationship.

"It is natural," she muses to herself. "But I wish he would only laugh at the notion of so young a mother, as Ernest does."

But Drury has added reasons for his depression which his young stepmother never guesses.

Miss Macnair has settled herself—or, rather, allowed her brother-in-law to settle her—in the Dower House; and, though only a ten minutes' walk across the park brings her to High Sutton, she lets many a day pass without crossing it, unless the twins are at home.

But they are at home now, and Miss Macnair is talking of them as she loiters on the terrace with the squire and Nora, and with the little one who has found no favour in her eyes. How he has possibly failed to do this is the one thought puzzling the squire's mind at this moment, as his little son stands laughing on the wide stone rail—a beautiful boy, with grave blue eyes, and a mouth all smiles and dimples—his mother's arm about him, and his mother's eyes brightening as they meet his.

"Now, Caroline," cried Mr. Sutton, delightedly, as the child sprang into his outstretched arms, "do say that baby is like our family, because everybody else tells Nora he has her face."

"He is not at all like your sons—I mean your other sons," observed Miss Macnair, icily. "They were, fortunately for them, not so much petted either," she continued, in the silence which followed her kind remark.

"The petting is all we can give this little lad," said the squire, good-humouredly. "He will have to rough it with the world presently, like the poorest of us."

"Probably," observed Miss Macnair, "Carleton will soon discover how very much in his light his brother Ernest stands."

"What are you saying, Caroline?" inquired Mr. Sutton, sternly, as he closed his arms more tightly about his boy. "Our little lad

will never think of Ernest save as his big, kind brother, just as Drury always did, only that there would have been some excuse for Drury to resent his juniorship. Where there is only twenty minutes of priority, the chance has been so nearly escaped ; where there is twenty years, the case is *very* different."

Miss Macnair was gazing curiously into Nora's face, perhaps because it was so beautiful with loving pride and bright content.

"I knew a boy," she said, as Nora's girlish laugh came brightly from her lips, "who inherited a splendid estate when he came of age, though when I saw him first—just such a child as yours, Nora,—five healthy lives stood between him and the property. So there is even a chance in this case."

"I hope," said Nora, and they each noticed that her face had grown very white, though she smiled, "that there is no *chance* in such a case."

"We cannot, of course, expect," resumed Miss Macnair, with motiveless obstinacy, "that you do not occasionally wish this home which is his father's could some day belong to your boy."

Then Nora laughed as she stooped to kiss the child.

"Perhaps," she said, debonairly, "no mother thinks it wicked to be avaricious for her son."

"Perhaps so," replied the elder lady, ominously ; "though why that species of coveting should be more free from sin than any other it puzzles *me* to imagine."

"Nora, my darling," put in her husband, very gently, as he stroked her soft, bright hair, "when you jest *so*, Caroline does not understand you ; and think what spectacles she would need to find a speck of covetousness in *your* nature."

Perhaps Miss Macnair did not like the idea of being jested with at all, and perhaps the sight of the perfect confidence between husband and wife galled her a little as she recollected the old days when her sister left his heart aching and unsatisfied. In any case she turned away abruptly, and put on the shawl which Nora had carried out for her.

"If you are going for a walk, Caroline," said her brother-in-law, the passing cloud gone from his genial, handsome face, "wait for us."

"I should have liked to come, Miss Macnair," put in Nora, in her warm, bright tones, "but I promised Ernest to join him at the river with baby. If we reach home first we will walk towards the village to meet you and Wynter ; if you are first, will you come towards the boat-house to meet us ?"

But Nora's chief reason for refusing to join this walk was not her half-promise to Ernest. She understood pretty well now the jealous nature of her husband's sister-in-law ; and, rightly judging

that she would now and then enjoy the squire's society all to herself, the girl-wife, whose nature was utterly free from jealousy of any kind, would often invent a harmless excuse to leave the two together.

The squire and Miss Macnair reached home first, but, instead of going at once to meet Nora, they lingered together on the terrace, just where they had chattered before separating, but silent now, waiting and watching for the others. Presently, quite suddenly this silence was broken by a cry—a swift, thrill cry of horror, which pierced the air and echoed in the massive walls behind them.

"It was a—a laugh, I suppose," faltered Miss Macnair, her lips white and stiff.

The squire's head was raised, every nerve strained to listen.

"It was no laugh," he said. "Caroline, wait here for Nora."

With a sudden impulse she closed her hand upon his arm.

"I cannot let you go," she sobbed: "it has frightened me. It seemed like Nora's shriek. Stay! Listen! There are footsteps."

It was Nora's own fleet tread which presently reached their ears; and the squire, shaking off his sister's detaining hand, clasped his arm about his wife when she came towards them from the park, her step unsteady, and her eyes feverishly bright in their terror.

"My love," he cried, his tones shaken by a vague alarm, "you are safe in your husband's care. Nothing can hurt you here. Feel how strong I am, and how closely I can guard you. My precious one, how white and ill you look! What is it? Tell me? Where," in sudden fear, "is baby?"

She turned eagerly to point on the way she had come.

"There," she whispered, as if glad to speak of something else.

"There—safe. Oh, my husband, fetch him, and let me go!"

Yet, when his grasp was loosened, she only turned and faced him, with a ghastly pallor on her face.

"To the river," she whispered, the words faltering through her parted lips. "Ernest—the Fall. Oh, quick!"

One look of wild, incredulous inquiry her husband gave into her face, and then he turned and ran; and Nora, shrinking from Miss Macnair, crept up to the house, and soon was lost to the keen eyes that followed her.

The great dinner-bell had long ceased its unavailing summons, and the dishes were left to grow cold under the covers. There had settled upon the house a hush which in itself was terrible after those hours of excitement. The physicians had left, and their hopeless verdict of "too late" had passed so constantly from

mouth to mouth that even its keen sting was deadened a little already. Almost the only sound proceeded from Miss Macnair's chamber, where she lay sobbing violently upon her bed. All other rooms in the great house seemed as silent as that one where the heir lay stiff and dead, with the trophies of his boyish tastes around him.

Mr. Sutton, whose face in those three hours had grown aged and lined, softly closed the door of this chamber, which, in that gathering of the twilight, had changed from the noisiest in the house to the awful centre of its deathly stillness; and, with a new heaviness and weakness in his step, went on to his wife's dressing-room. The candles were lighted, and by their light he saw in a moment that the room was empty. He softly passed into the chamber beyond, and searched it even in the darkness.

"My poor darling!" he murmured, as he turned towards the nurseries. "That angry, hysterical rebuff of Caroline's was cruel, when she was trying so bravely to be patient and comforting."

The door of his little boy's nursery was locked, and the squire's heart sank when he saw this, and that the room was still in darkness.

"Nora," he whispered, pleadingly, "it is only I, my love."

His voice was shaken and weakened by the awful shock and grief of those past hours, and the low tones startled Nora as her husband's tones had never startled her before. Yet, without turning the key, she sat, with her hands tight upon her temples, listening in the darkness.

"Let me in, my darling wife."

Her hands fell helplessly at her side, and the great pain and love upon her face were pitiful to see; but she still stood with the locked door between her and her husband. No word of blame or even surprise he uttered, while she, who ought to have sought him now to comfort him, hid herself from him, even when he sought her. But he called her lovingly again, in a voice so stirred and broken by the pain he suffered, that, after one moment's clasp of her raised hands and closing of her strained eyes, she turned the key, and, even in the gloom, eagerly and wistfully met her husband's gaze.

In another moment her face was hidden on his breast, and her whole frame was shaken by passionate, suppressed sobs; whilst the tears fell at last from *his* eyes too, slowly and silently down upon her bent head.

So they stood in this close embrace beside their sleeping child, until Nora's tears stayed, and, shrinking from her husband's arms, she went to her baby's bed, and laid one hand upon his pillow.

"I have been dreaming—I must have been dreaming in the darkness. Oh! my husband, tell me—*what* is true?"

Frightened a little by her manner, he told her, as quietly and simply as he could; knowing well that this agony of repetition was unnecessary, because she had looked with him upon his son's dead face, and had repeated in this same awed tone the doctor's words, "Too late!"

"I—I cannot understand," she faltered, her eyes so pitifully wide and eager.

"Yet it was you who knew it first, my darling," Wynter Sutton whispered, covering his own eyes; "your cry was our only preparation for the awful truth. You saw—oh! my love, I dare not picture what you saw!"

"Yes," said Nora, in a slow, distinct tone, her right hand softly lying now upon her baby's hair, "I saw the boat glide over the Fall as smoothly as if it did not mean an instantaneous death. Did—no one else see?"

"No one else. Your cry gave the first alarm, and I think others had gathered at the Fall even before I reached it. Drury was last; he had been wandering alone with his gun all the afternoon, and he thought it was only in fancy that he heard a faint and distant cry."

"He was never in sight then of—the boat?"

"No, darling; would to God he had been!"

"Why?"

"Why?" he echoed, in pained surprise. "He might have saved his brother's life. Just think of that haunting thought for him—ay, and even for me! Ernest might have been saved, if one of us had been in time."

"Might have been saved!" repeated Nora, with strange, suppressed vehemence. "No, no, the current was so strong and rapid that in one moment it was over, and hope was dead."

"My darling, my poor darling," murmured Mr. Sutton, drawing his wife to his side again, "it has been a terrible shock for you! Come with me to the light and warmth, my child. Come, and give your own sweet words of comfort to poor Drury."

"No," she said, and shrank again from his caressing touch; "Drury will—hate to see me."

"My dear, you wrong him sadly. Deeply as he is mourning his twin brother, he must know that, even if he had seen what you saw, he could not have rescued Ernest. Besides, my darling," continued the squire, with a pitiful effort to speak in his natural tone, "Caroline is totally unnerved, and who can help us all like my own dear wife? Come."

"She sent me from her," said Nora, softly. "But," with one hurried sob, "I will come."

Miss Macnair, when they reached her room, was still crying aloud for Ernest. Demonstrative as was her grief, it was terribly sincere, for the only person in all the world on whom she had lavished any wealth of affection was her sister's eldest son; and now her cries for him, and her sobs, when memory told her she must cry in vain, were torturing to hear.

But both her cries and sobs were silenced by one spasmodic effort when Nora came gently up to the bed and laid one hand on hers.

"Go away!" she said, with bitter slowness. "Do you think that a caress of yours can reconcile me to a grief which it is beyond your power to imagine? You have your own son; go to *him*, and you will soon be comforted."

"My little one can in no way take Ernest's place, Miss Macnair," said Nora, with great gentleness.

"Not," replied Caroline Macnair, icily, "while Drury lives."

And then her tears gushed out afresh, and Mr. Sutton, curbing his anger against her because she was in grief, could only lead his young wife from the room.

"Come away," pleaded Nora, vacantly, when they reached the hall, and the chill night air blew on them from the open door. "The house is stifling me."

He turned aside to get her a shawl, but she hurried on, and when he followed her out upon the terrace, he found her standing opposite Drury, and both their faces were pallid in the gloom.

"He was not rowing, he was lying idly in the boat, with his head upon the seat in the stern—I think asleep."

So Nora was saying as the squire came up to her, and she did not cease or turn while he folded the shawl about her.

"That accounts," says Drury, addressing his father, but without removing his eyes from Nora's face, "for the story Reynolds has been telling me, and is waiting now to tell you. He says that twice during this afternoon he passed that shady nook on the river where Ernest has always been so fond of idling; the first time was early, and Ernest had drawn up his boat there and was tying it to one of the pollards, waiting (he told Reynolds) for Mrs. Sutton. I do not know why he should choose to wait below the boat-house, knowing what the current to the Fall would do if the cord broke. It was rash, and unlike Ernest."

"Yes; he waited there for me," said Nora, quietly, still standing opposite Drury, and gazing fixedly at him through the gloom, as she listened to what he had heard of his brother.

"Perhaps so," returned the young man, absently; "but later

on, when Reynolds passed the second time, he fancied Ernest lay asleep in the boat, the oars beside him, his head, just as Nora said, on the seat in the stern. The boat was still fast, Reynolds says, the cords twisted round the pollard and knotted. It must have been a feeble, careless knot, and I think Reynolds ought to have seen to it, knowing the danger to Ernest."

"A feeble, careless knot, indeed!" replied the squire, his chest heaving with emotion. "My poor, poor boy!"

"Would that account for all?" asked Nora, still with the same immovable questioning gaze.

"I suppose so," returned Drury, gravely, in his heavy sadness; "but it cannot lessen the anguish of his loss—to me especially."

Then he turned away and hurried from them, while his father looked after him with deep concern.

"This day," he said, sorrowfully, to himself, "will leave its mark upon my boy's whole life. He is not one to grieve for an hour, and then forget; and they were twins."

Then the strong man lost his self-control, and Nora, in a moment, was the comforter, calm and earnest. An hour afterwards the lamp-light filled the rooms again, and Nora was hovering about the tea-table, trying gently and bravely to help and cheer them all.

So the night fell upon the saddened house; and it was only when the chamber doors were closed that the new deep grief held ruthless sway once more, and made the night hours drag heavily.

There is no need to tell how the days passed before the young heir of High Sutton was laid in the great vault which had been opened only once before. There were the official forms to go through; but the verdict of "accidental death" shed no further light upon that evening's mystery and misfortune, and took no edge from the grief.

When the squire and his son returned, after the cruel form had been gone through, Nora met them, slowly and sadly walking towards them in the sunshine.

"My darling," the squire said, trying to rouse himself from his deep and heavy depression, as he drew her hand tenderly through his arm.

"Is—more known?" she asked, looking wistfully across her husband, into Drury's face.

"Accidental death," said Drury, gently turning aside her question.

"Tell me, Wynter," she pleaded. "Is no more known?"

"One man," returned the squire, evidently speaking with

unwillingness, "wished, after the inquest was officially over, to insinuate that the matter should be looked into further."

"Why?"

"Here is Caroline," he said, without answering.

"If anyone wishes that the matter should be looked into," began Miss Macnair, betraying equally by her words, and the rigid compression of her lips, that she had overheard her brother's last remark, "they mean that there has been foul play; and the matter *must* be looked into, Drury."

It struck them all as curious that she should address herself to her nephew in answering her brother-in-law, and no one had replied when she spoke again, with slow distinctness.

"It means that the boat had been loosed purposely from the pollard and left to float direct to the Fall, and—to certain death."

"Caroline," interrupted the squire, his voice shaken by anger as well as pain, "would you—who loved him—be the one to cloud, even for one moment, our fair remembrance of our boy?"

There was no other word uttered then; but a chill had fallen among them, whose shadow could be lifted never again.

As the day's passed, after his son's funeral, Mr. Sutton grew seriously alarmed about his wife's health; for, since the hour of Ernest's death, her colour, her spirit, and her appetite had entirely left her, and she moved about the house white and quiet as a ghost, though her words were still bright, and her hands prompt in their care and kindly deeds.

"I must take Nora away," he said, rousing himself one day from a long, sad reverie, when Miss Macnair came suddenly upon him.

"Why?" she inquired, with an extra coldness in her voice.

"I cannot bear to see her as she is. She owns to no pain, and will see no doctor, yet takes no rest nor sleep. It—it is as if she were fading from our sight."

"It is strange," mused Miss Macnair. "She says she does not suffer; yet it is hard to believe, knowing how she herself has owned that Ernest stood in her son's way, that her sufferings have been *mental* since my dear Ernest met with that strange death, which she alone witnessed. I always think she would have suffered less since, if she had at once disburdened her mind of all she—knew. Some pressure has been heavy upon her mind since that hour when she ran shrieking from the spot."

"Spot!" echoed the squire, huskily. "She was in the park, not far from us; and——"

But his sister-in-law had caught sight of Nora in the distance,

and went to join her, leaving the bitter seed to take slow root in the heart which was so unwilling to receive it, and fought so hard against the cruel insinuation.

All that evening there was a curious watchfulness in her husband's manner which Nora could not help noticing; yet, withal, an added tenderness to her, if that were possible. He noticed that her voice was sweet and kind, as of old, yet there was something different; all its old brightness had gone, and he wondered now that he had never noticed any change beyond her weariness and pallor. He fancied that Drury watched her too, and he marked how her eyes avoided his always, though she would glance at him when his head was bent above his book, or when he was talking to some one else. Then she would let her eyes rest upon him, sometimes moving them slowly with an effort, and sometimes swiftly closing them, or turning them, as if in sudden pain.

"How it saddens her!" mused the squire to himself, "to witness Drury's undiminished grief. My poor boy! Will he ever get over that shock, and will he ever again take an interest in the estate, as he should do doubly now? I must get Nora, before she goes, to tempt him back to his old pursuits, and, if possible, to his brother's old pursuits too. He will be better and happier when he has once more resumed his rightful position as heir."

By which it was plain that Drury had not taken upon himself any of his brother's prerogatives.

"Nora, my darling," said the squire that very night, "I want to travel for a little time, and I cannot go without you. Will you come, you and I alone?"

His heart leaped with joy to hear her quick and glad assent.

"Oh, Wynter, how kind you are to me!" she cried, tears falling quickly down her white cheeks. "It is for my sake that you say it. Oh, my husband, will you be satisfied with me alone?"

His own eyes were not dry when he folded his arms about the slender figure.

"Satisfied, my love! What else in all the world do I need when you are with me?"

"You have your son, too—Drury, I mean. Wynter," she said, turning to him in sudden, pitiful earnestness, "if one of us lost all claim to your great, great love, and kindness, and compassion, you—you would still have the other."

"But I have both," he answered, smiling fondly, as he kissed her earnest face; "not to mention my darling sleeping in the next room. Is he to go with us, little wife?"

In one moment she read his wish—that he could have her to

himself, free from all care and all responsibility—and she answered lovingly that she only wished for her husband for that time. So it was settled they should go together ; and two days afterwards they were upon their way to Italy.

“ This absence of ours will be the best thing in the world for Drury,” the squire had said, while he waved his last good-bye to the young man, who stood quiet and grave upon the station platform. “ He will rouse himself to superintend matters for me, and to write to us, and to exert the authority I have thus tacitly invested in him. Poor Drury ! I trust, too, that time will a little soften his grief for his twin-brother. His was a deep-rooted love, my darling, was it not, for all his quietness ? That consciousness makes me trust in his firm affection for us, in spite of his absent, undemonstrative manner.”

“ For me, you mean,” said Nora, with her gentle smile, as she recalled Drury’s chilly leave-taking. “ *Nothing* could ever have allowed you to doubt his love for you, Wynter. And do not fret that he does not love me as—as we used to hope he might. He feels Ernest’s death recalled to him, I fancy, by even my very presence. It will wear off, perhaps.”

“ Perhaps !” he echoed, tenderly. “ As if anything else were possible !”

CHAPTER III.

MEETING THE BLOW.

It was a fair spring day. Thrushes sang in that old pollard from which Ernest’s boat had sped to destruction ; and from the elms higher up the river the blackbirds answered with their full, rich note. The meadows below the Fall were golden sweet with buttercups, and the roses filled the great house with a perfume which was the very life-breath of the spring.

The squire and his wife have reached home, and its beauty and its calm have filled their hearts with a rest and gratitude which are but fitting tributes to the glory of such a day and such a scene, and fit preparatives for the peaceful, joyous years which seem to stretch before them in the golden future.

Was this Nora’s thought as she sat among the roses, her baby’s soft cheek pressed against her own, his little laughing lips uttering the one name which was music sweeter than the birds’ songs above ?

Was it the squire’s thought as he looked upon the picture, before he linked his arm in his son’s, feeling what a manly fellow Drury had grown, how wisely he had acted during his regency,

and how much he had improved in every way, though even yet the memory of his twin-brother made him so sensitive to Nora's presence ?

For a long hour, father and son loitered together, the father praising everything the son had done, and the son glad and proud to have pleased him, and even glad to show a change in himself. It was not until they had reached the house again, and were waiting for Miss Macnair and Nora, that by chance arose that subject which Mr. Sutton had carefully avoided. And it was then that a sudden pain at his heart reminded the squire that the bitter seed *had* been once sown.

He never could afterwards recollect what was said—nothing definite, he was certain—but he knew that a shadow had fallen on the sunny beauty of his home, and that his eyes fell with a weight upon them when Nora came up to him, in her brightness and her girlish beauty.

From that hour the taint of the foul seed asserted itself, and, nobly as he tried to deaden or conquer it, and true and steadfast as was his certainty of his wife's spotless innocence, even the consciousness of the seed being there could but sadden the earnest nature of the man, and even tell its tale upon his handsome face.

So, as time went on, the passing benefit of that sojourn abroad wore off ; Nora's short-lived colour faded again, her step lost its lightness, and the old, weary look stole back into her eyes.

"Miss Macnair," the girl whispered, one day, when the squire's sister came into the nursery, and found her sitting alone with her little boy, "would you tell me something which—which my husband never speaks of, and which I would rather not ask Drury ?"

"What is that ?" inquired the elder lady, in just the cold tones to which Nora had grown accustomed since Ernest's death.

"Was anything more said about Ernest's death having been — Oh, you remember what was hinted after the inquest—having been premeditated ?"

"More !" repeated Miss Macnair, gazing before her fixedly. "What more could be said until the whole thing is explained ?"

"Explained !" echoed Nora, vaguely, while she bent her face above her baby's, but failed to hide its flash of vivid colour. "Can it ever be explained more fully ?"

"If not," ejaculated Miss Macnair, rather loudly as she rose, "some one will die with a sin upon their conscience, which will bar Heaven's gates to them for ever. How you stare, child ! Are you coming to luncheon ?"

"Not quite yet," faltered Nora, putting the little boy from her knee; "will you take baby, please, and I will follow?"

Ten minutes before, the squire had entered the dining-room with a worn and harrassed look upon his face which in a moment caught Drury's eyes, as he stood at the window waiting for the family to assemble for luncheon.

"Has anything happened, father?" he asked, anxiously. "Have you been worried?"

"Reynolds always puts me out," muttered the squire, as he slowly paced the room, "harping as he does on one wretched string."

"The mystery of Ernest's death, you mean?" asked Drury, in his father's pause. "I knew you would be worried by this question when you returned, and, for that reason, I endeavoured to prepare you a little. Reynolds is a fool, and I think nothing of his absurd innuendoes."

"Your brother's death, Drury," said the poor squire, with an earnestness that was almost wistful, "was the result of a most melancholy accident, and God knows its sorrow was deep enough for us all, without any attempt to—heighten it."

"Even supposing——"

"Supposing what?" was the sharp question which interrupted Drury, and literally made him start.

"Even supposing that it was not an accident—and of course that seems impossible to us all—what difference can any of these insane surmises make? The truth can never reach us now."

"The truth is reached," interposed Mr. Sutton, contemptuously. "You know how heedless our dear boy," the tones could not retain their scorn here, but melted to a great tenderness, "always was. And surely you can see, Drury, like myself, how plainly that escape of his boat, while he lay asleep, was the result of that thoughtlessness only."

"Decidedly," returned Drury, in his grave, calm way. "Reynolds' surmises will never harrass me, father, as they have harassed you—and Nora."

Drury's eyes turned slowly from his father's face as the last words were uttered, and he was glad to hear the pattering footsteps outside, and to turn away and open the door upon his aunt and little brother.

The child ran past him straight to his father's arms, and the squire's face melted, and his kisses fell soft and tremulous as a woman's upon the little lips.

Never for a moment did Mr. Sutton acknowledge, even to himself, that only with his little boy did he now feel entirely

at his ease, or that only into his baby's eyes now could he ever look with utter happy confidence; and even still less did he understand how his deep and unchangeable love for his young wife found rarely now an utterance save to her baby boy.

"Nora wishes us to lunch with her," said Miss Macnair, moving to her seat.

"Is Nora not well?" asked Drury, anxiously.

"Quite well! only dull and whimsical. I really do not comprehend her moods lately."

"I will fetch Nora," said Mr. Sutton, quietly. "Do not ring until she comes. Thanks, Drury. Yes, take him from me. He is generally willing enough to go to you."

"At present," smiled Drury, taking his little brother from his father's arms. "It is only I, so far, who have the unpleasant consciousness of the difference in our prospects."

"A morbid idea, my lad, and unworthy of you. Do you think Ernest ever felt so in old times?"

"We were different," returned the young man, slowly. "We were really brothers."

"And so are you and this little fellow," put in the squire, in a vexed tone; "despite the four feet difference in your height. And certainly, Drury, you ought to be generous enough to credit *him* with as much unselfishness as you yourself exhibited as a younger son."

"But Ernest never felt that my want of inheritance was a sore thought for one other person."

"Rubbish!" interposed the squire, hastily. "Recall old times, dear boy, and be more generous, in a wider sense of the word, than that which you show. If you never chafed at your elder brother's superiority of fortune, when there were but twenty minutes between you, how can you dream of this lad doing so when he is your junior by twenty years?"

"Drury very naturally feels," put in Miss Macnair, from her seat at the table, "that *Nova* resents his standing in the light of her pet."

Without answering, and with a certain mournful dignity, the squire took his boy from Drury's arms and put him down upon the floor. Then he left the room, and when he returned with Nora, his manner was just as usual to all seeming.

Rather slowly and heavily the summer days passed at High Sutton, in spite of brave resolves made every now and then by every member of the household. Miss Macnair made her visits more frequent to the Dower House, but her presence never had been a brightening influence, and was less so than ever now that she spent most of the time of her stay at High Sutton in weeping

over her nephew's early death, and sternly and suspiciously discussing its attendant circumstances.

Patiently always Nora listened—so patiently that her gentleness often struck more than one of her listeners with a keen surprise—but rarely did she answer unnecessarily, and never did she venture any opinion of her own.

The squire's manner to his young wife was tender and protecting as of old, yet, even to the least watchful eyes, it was evident that *something* stood between them, as impassable as it was intangible. Drury had little need now for steady watchfulness, for most rare were those moments of confidence between the husband and wife which used to bring that intense vigilance into his eyes. Drury Sutton's grief for his brother never seemed to lessen, even as the summer passed, and his father rejoiced unfeignedly when at last he consented to go abroad.

"I have urged it so long in vain," he said, when he delightedly told Nora of his son's consent to the plan, "that his assent has taken me by the pleasantest surprise. He will come back to us a different fellow, for such tenacious sorrow is not natural in a young man—even such a sterling fellow as Drury."

"Wynter, will you not go with him for a time?" questioned Nora, earnestly.

"Certainly not, love, unless you come, and we leave our little one as prime minister. That reminds me, Nora—Will you manage, some time before Drury leaves, to—to let him know how content you are to feel that our boy should have to work his own way up in the world? I know, my darling, how really satisfied you are that it should be so, and that never for one moment do you regret that our pet does not inherit what by such a mournful chance has fallen to Drury's lot, but I want you to let *him* be fully certain of your feeling in this matter before he leaves us. I think such a confidence may assist the change in uprooting this settled and morbid melancholy of his. Will you try?"

"I will indeed," she said; "and by act as well as word."

But, earnestly as she spoke, her husband could not help seeing that she shrank from her task.

"Again we shall be alone for a time, Wynter," she added, wistfully. "Are you as content as you—used to be?"

"Fully content, my darling," he answered, and when she smiled and kissed him, in her gentle, child-like way, he hated himself that still there hung this grey, intangible shadow between them.

During the few days which intervened before Drury's departure it would have seemed to a casual observer as if Nora's old brightness had returned to her. Her husband's wish was carried out, with a zeal and earnestness of which he had never guessed. Her

clear, girlish voice made music in the house once more; her light step was swift to come and go, just as it used to be. She walked and rode with Drury, and in the house she hovered about him, packing for him, chatting with him, and entering into everything which could amuse or interest him.

Her husband looked on in delight. Surely Drury would understand *now* how ridiculous was his idea of the light in which Nora regarded him.

Drury's manner also to his young step-mother gave the squire a relief which he hardly could have acknowledged even to himself; for he never saw how its remembrance brought hot tears to Nora's eyes, in those stolen hours through which her thoughts were allowed to hold what course they would, as she sat alone with her baby in the autumn twilight.

Drury had made up his mind to stay for a week or two in London, and Mr. Sutton had heard twice from him there, when an ancient Irish gentleman expressed himself desirous of purchasing the boggy estate in Connaught which was Nora's patrimony, and requested an interview upon the spot with Mr. Carleton's sole executor. Not at all unwilling was Mr. Sutton for the run over to Ireland, for the Connaught bog had weighed rather heavily upon his mind now for three years.

"Good-bye, my darling," he said to Nora when they parted. "I wish you would have consented to come, but perhaps, as you say, it would only have awakened sad reminiscences for you. Good-bye, dear little lad; you are to be a rich man, you see, after all, with the purchase-money of Baggalley."

So it was with a laugh he looked his last upon them, and, though the tears stood thick in Nora's eyes, it was with a laugh too that she met his last, loving glance.

For three weeks Mr. Sutton was detained in Ireland, and then he started gladly homewards, wondering whether Nora would have received his letter, and would have come to meet him. The doubt was set at rest when he reached the station, for not only was Nora not there, but there was even no carriage sent to meet him. Leaving his luggage, he set out to walk, but did not follow his usual habit of passing the Dower House that he might look in upon Miss Macnair; yet never, on recalling that day, could Mr. Sutton understand why he had not done this, or why, through all his walk, he hurried past those who would have stayed and spoken to him. For three weeks he had been away without uneasiness; yet in this one hour his anxiety had grown so intense that those who met him looked after him in wondering surprise.

Eagerly his eyes scanned the windows when he came in sight of

home, but no young face appeared there and brightened at his coming.

"Nora! Nora!"

In glad, clear tones he called her, but no young step ran down the stairs to meet him.

"My mistress, sir?" inquired the old butler, with evident surprise at his master's appearance. "Has she not returned with you?"

CHAPTER IV.

"FALSE FLEW THE SHAFT."

WITH an inexplicable feeling of having expected just such tidings as these words conveyed, Mr. Sutton mounted, with a heavy step, to his little boy's rooms, vaguely conscious of hoping that, wherever she might be, Nora would have their child with her, for no fear save thought for *her* had found its way yet into his warm heart.

In little Carlton's nursery another surprise awaited him. The child, pale and listless, lay on Miss Macnair's lap, and Miss Macnair's face was made more stern than usual by its genuine anxiety.

"What is it?" questioned the squire, as he gently took the baby in his arms. "My little one—my poor little darling—what does this mean?"

And even Miss Macnair's cold eyes overflowed when she saw the father's heavy tears fall upon the little white dress.

"Nora ought to be here," she stammered, in an impotent and feeble spirit of wrath. "Did she not join you, Wynter?"

"Join *me*! Oh! Caroline, what do you mean?"

"I don't know what I mean," sighed Miss Macnair. "I don't know what anyone means, or—where anybody is."

But presently, with the assistance of the nurses and Nora's maid, she was able to make Mr. Sutton understand the few simple facts which lay embedded in her angry and nervous declamations. Nora had gone from home two weeks ago. She had left a letter, which was to be posted to her husband on a certain date, but she had not given any address for her own letters to be forwarded. She had taken her own ticket at the station, and had not even let the servant wait to see her box labelled. She had shed a great many tears while kissing her baby before she left, and had given the nurses strict and careful instructions (literally *appealing* to them) to watch and care for her little boy, but she had not told them when she

should return. She had left a message of farewell for Miss Macnair, but had not called in at the Dower House, although she had passed.

"And has no letter arrived from her?"

"None, and, strange to say, none either has arrived from Drury since one Nora received a few hours before she left."

Of course, the little boy had been quite well when their mistress left—the squire inquired, turning almost fiercely to the women.

No, he had been ailing for several days before.

For one minute Mr. Sutton's strong arms closed convulsively about his child, then, without another word, he left the room. When Miss Macnair, amid her fretting, heard the sound of wheels beneath the window, she felt herself prepared for the few pencilled lines which a servant brought her, sealed by her brother's hand.

"Have Nora's rooms ready for her to-night. I think that Drury must have sent for her, and that she waits there for me."

Over this little note, pathetic in its trustfulness, Miss Macnair's sobs broke out afresh, and even the baby's plaintive little cry could not rouse her to action until the tears had exhausted themselves.

"He has deceived himself," she thought, with her concluding gasp, "and he would deceive me if he could."

Before his little son was soothed to sleep that night, the squire had reached London. He drove at once to the hotel at which Drury had been staying, but it was only to hear that young Mr. Sutton had left there after one week, and had taken rooms in an adjoining street. The street and number could be easily ascertained, because his letters were constantly forwarded.

Holding the address mechanically in his hand—while his lips repeated the number ceaselessly, as if it might still escape him—and with an awful suspicion gnawing at his heart, the squire walked along the pavement while some of the passers-by looked after him, marvelling that one so ill should be allowed to walk alone.

"Number eighteen—eighteen—eighteen, so he murmured to himself, even after he had stopped before the door, and knocked feebly upon it. "Eighteen—eighteen."

He looked down upon the paper once again, as he still held it securely in his hand, then let his eyes wander from window to window. In those near, there were flowers blooming, and a canary chirping, but behind the upper ones the blinds were

drawn so closely (although that side of the street was in the shadow) that the squire's eyes fell, and he hurriedly repeated his summons. Almost as he did so the door was opened, and a servant waited for his nervous, unpremeditated request.

"Will you give that card to Mrs. Sutton?"

Judging by the sudden rush of colour to his worn face when his message had been fulfilled, he had not expected this success.

"Mrs. Sutton will be with you in a moment, sir," the maid said, as she left him in the large front sitting-room upstairs, where he had noticed the darkened windows; but it was many moments before the door was re-opened. Then he came forward, knowing—though he did not see, for his eyes were blinded by the anguish of suspense—that Nora had entered.

She closed the door behind her, but made no step forward, only her eyes were full of longing, and her hands, outstretched unconsciously, told their own sad tale.

"Oh! Wynter, why did you come?" she cried, her eyes wide and dry. "How can I bear to see you there, and know I may not come nearer?"

"You know best, Nora," he answered, with a great agony in his face, as he tried to believe *something* which his mind could not grasp; and as he curbed his passionate desire to fold in his arms the light form pausing so far from him, and lay upon his breast the earnest face so full of trouble now.

"Where is Drury?"

She made one step forward at this question, then drew back, her breath coming in gasps, and both hands pressed tightly on her heart.

"He—he—— Oh! my husband, you know—you know. I wrote it all to you in Ireland."

"I have had no letter," he said, still standing motionless in his overpowering suspense.

"Then I—I have it all to tell. Oh! is life to be such pain as this for ever? My dear, my dear, do not look at me so. I did my best. I never left him. I—I sent for you when he gave me leave; but—but, oh! Wynter, try to remember it was God's will!"

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Sutton, drawing one hand across his brow. "Is my boy—dead?"

"Dead," she echoed, in hushed tones, "and of a fever so infectious that I dare not touch you, Wynter, because I was with him."

"Where—" faltered the squire, but his dry lips would not frame a word beyond.

With her hand she pointed overhead, and then was creeping from the room, when he sternly called her back.

"Why did you not send for me in time?"

"I thought I did. I hoped and prayed my letter might bring you in time. Oh! Wynter, let me go! I will tell you afterwards. I will go away for a little time, and after that I shall not be afraid for you, or—our little one."

"My——" The speech so natural to him was strangled in its birth. "Send some one to me who can answer my questions."

An elderly woman entered the room soon afterwards, and Mr. Sutton, his voice faint and broken in spite of all his efforts to steady and strengthen it, won from her the answers to his eager questions.

Nearly three weeks before this day, young Mr. Sutton had taken her first-floor, and moved in straight from his hotel. She had fancied him looking flushed and ill, but of course, if she had known he took these rooms because he was in the grip of a long illness, she should have declined such a lodger; though certainly he was handsome about terms, and did arrange (when he was confident what his illness was) to pay for the whole house, because, of course, other lodgers could not stay—at least, it was the young lady who did all that, but it amounted to the same thing in the end. It was only this morning the young gentleman had died; this morning, just after midnight.

No, no one had ever helped the young lady in the nursing; no one else was ever beyond the bed-room door; no one else, strange to say.

A doctor? No, no doctor was ever allowed to come until yesterday, when, of course, it was too late to be of use. All through the worst part of the illness no doctor had been sent for, and even once, when taking the responsibility upon herself, she had summoned her own medical man, he had not been allowed to enter the sick-room; indeed, it was no wonder he had said that such conduct looked suspicious on the part of young Mrs. Sutton—the poor dead gentleman's wife—though, of course, it was hard to imagine she could have any motive for keeping his death secret.

It had been a bad thing for the house—very bad, of course; but the lady had promised that the dead young gentleman's father would pay anything, and that she would take all the luggage away with her to the seaside, where it would lose its infection.

Nothing more could have been told, even by the physician who had been summoned just at the end, when, of course, it was too late to be of use, and who had been present at the death, and expressed himself greatly astonished at such secrecy. Nothing more, except the anguish wrought by her words, and

the swift resurrection of that old suspicion which had been sleeping until it had seemed dead.

Mr. Sutton was pacing to and fro in the room, when a cab was pulled up noisily before the door. On a sudden his mind awoke to the meaning of this, and he rang the bell violently.

Yes, that cab was for Mrs. Sutton, yet not exactly for her either. The luggage, packed in new deal boxes, for fear of carrying the infection, was going on the cab, but Mrs. Sutton had said she would walk. It was safer, she had said, and the long walk to the station would do her good. She had sent to secure a compartment for herself.

"She is full cautious," muttered the squire, "and clever. Ask Mrs. Sutton to see me before she starts." Then he lay with his head on his arms until she came softly to the door again, when he started up and took what sternness he could into his lined face, though all the while his heart yearned passionately to her, as she stood so sad, and young, and beautiful, trying to guard him from such pain as she had braved herself.

Only *which* was true?

Eagerly longing to know—longing for her to prove herself pure and innocent, that he might take her to his heart once more,—for what fear of infection could stay his hand if she were only true and blameless?—he asked her one question.

"Nora, why was it that you came to my son?"

"He sent for me."

"And"—her quiet answer had disturbed his forced calmness; but, after a moment's pause, he spoke again—"why were you alone with him through all this time?"

"He wished it."

"He wished it!" echoed the squire, passionately, "you are safe in speaking so *now*. *He wished it!* Would any such feverish wish—even if expressed—have been needed by a conscientious watcher in such a case as this?"

"I cannot tell," she said, pushing her hair from her white face, while her eyes grew vacant in their gaze. "I used to wonder and wonder *which* was right; and I prayed to do the best. I never knew. I had no one to tell me."

"Nora, what can your thoughts have been through his illness, that you should have *dared* to shut out all human help? Answer me."

"I—cannot."

"Nora, my wife, answer me in Heaven's name, and take this horrible weight from my soul. Each moment seems to hold a life of agony. Answer me, in pity to us both, and in justice to my dead boy."

"In justice to him," she repeated, brokenly, "I cannot. Let me go now. Every moment that I stay is dangerous to you."

"You may go," he said, contemptuously turning from her pleading gesture, "and until you can set this doubt at rest within my heart, I will not tempt you to return. I must wait here now, as you know; but my man is in town with me, and he will go with you to—to any seaside place which you may choose, and arrange everything for your convenience. I shall send your maid to join you."

"No, no," cried Nora, with one tearless sob. "I left her with baby; do not let her leave him, please."

He paused a moment, with a sudden recollection of how the child she loved so dearly was suffering now far away; but that same recollection showed him she had voluntarily left him in this suffering, and his heart was doubly steeled against her.

"Then I will send some one else," he said, "and she shall stay with—your son. He is unfortunately my heir now, and I will not send him from High Sutton."

She started back, as he made an involuntary movement towards her.

"I am not fainting. I—can listen—even to such words—as those."

"I had not meant to speak so of our boy," he said, hurriedly; his voice low and agitated; "you wrung it from me. Tell me, Nora, that you had no thought of *his* interest, when you let his brother die here."

A flame of scarlet rushed into Nora's face, then left it utterly colourless, even to the lips.

"I understand," she said, the words falling brokenly from her parted lips. "Stay, please, where you are. I—shall not faint. I understand now. You will guard him because he is your heir—*unfortunately* you said. *Unfortunately*. I—understand now. I have nothing to explain, so—we are parting for ever. If our boy— Ah! I remember, my own boy no longer—your heir—*unfortunately!* Oh, God, have pity!"

He caught her in his arms, in spite of her one swift movement to avoid him, but no merciful unconsciousness helped her in this bitter hour. With a calmness more terrible than any passion, she told him once again that she understood; and then, almost before he was aware, she had left him in the solitary, darkened room, a man aged twenty years in one day.

CHAPTER V.

FROM DRURY'S DESK.

THAT was indeed a melancholy return of the squire's to his beautiful old home; and when the vault had been opened once again, to be closed upon all those whose love had belonged to his early youth, his heart seemed dead within him.

But for his little boy's continued delicacy, he would have left home again at once, for the place so filled with memories of Nora and of his twin sons, had grown like a grave to him.

Miss Macnair watched in dread anxiety this change in her brother-in-law. If it had been a gradual one, she might, by degrees, have accustomed herself to it, but he had come home from Ireland strong and handsome, loving and eager; two days afterwards he had returned from London a worn, silent, nervous man.

The people whispered of him as he came and went, saying how terribly his son's sudden death had broken up his health and spirits; but Miss Macnair, in all her demonstrative grief for Drury, had room for a greater grief for him, because she felt that his heart must have been wrecked by a blow more crushing by far than death.

She did what she could for him, and never tired in her tasks; but her efforts were always worse than vain, because, in every word she uttered of the young wife who used to make home so dear to him, there lurked a cruel suspicion which he could not deny or even disbelieve, yet which he resented with a pain actually sensitive and jealous. But she was tender in her way to Nora's child, and, though the faithful maid who had been left in charge of him felt he might have even been the better without these excitable caresses and worrying attentions, still it was all done in real anxiety for his welfare, and the squire, in his own weary hours of watching, felt grateful for this one friend left.

It was nominally for the baby's sake that Miss Macnair had taken up her abode at High Sutton; but her real anxiety was for its father, and her keenest sympathy was with him, in spite of unremitting attention to the child for whom she felt no love.

As, day by day, the boy drooped, Miss Macnair observed a strange change in the father's manner. He grew actually to avoid the child, would stop himself when in the act of taking him from his aunt or nurse, and would draw back suddenly if the little lips sought his, shrinking even from the child's wistful caress.

"The boy reminds him so painfully of Nora," decided Miss Macnair, musing over this, "that he cannot bear even his presence."

But Miss Macnair was far from reaching the truth, for she could guess nothing of the father's sensitive, unselfish shrinking from these caresses, because he knew the mother was living her sad life without them.

At last this denial, and the sight of his motherless little one sinking day by day, could be borne no longer; and one night, as Miss Macnair left the nurseries, she found the squire waiting in the dim lobby to receive her.

"Caroline," he said, very quietly, standing where no light fell upon his face, "will you write to Nora? Ask her to come home and see her boy. In pity warn her of the change in him, and beg her to come at once. Be kind and compassionate to her, Caroline."

No answer came from Miss Macnair in her astonishment, but still the letter, containing just his own words, was written and despatched by the squire's servant.

Next day Mr. Sutton wandered restlessly about the park, never in sight of the avenue, but still never too far to catch the sound of the returning carriage which was sent to meet every train; and, when at last the wheels stopped at the door instead of passing on to the yard, he turned away, as if a great weight were lifted from his mind.

For hours he wandered dreamily among the fallen leaves, picturing Nora there within her old home, with her little one in her arms; drawn by a passionate longing to look once upon her, as she sat in her old place, and to comfort—— Ah! that was an impossible thought now. What comfort had she given him when *his* son lay ill—dying, without his father's blessing? No; she had now to bear the sorrow he had borne; that was all. But the consciousness of this hour's suffering for her made life doubly chill and heavy for him.

The thought was broken abruptly by Miss Macnair, who met him with a startled fear upon her face,

"Oh, Wynter," she cried. "Go in at once—at once—to——"

"To Nora," he supplemented, very softly. "I knew she had come; but she doesn't need me, Caroline."

"Not Nora," sobbed Miss Macnair, wringing her hands; "I mean baby. It—is all over."

"All over?"

Mechanically repeating the words to himself, Mr. Sutton passed his sister-in-law, and entered the house; but his fingers trembled so helplessly upon the handle of the nursery door that it was many moments before he could turn it.

How many and many a time had he entered the room to see this very picture—his young wife, from her seat beside the little bed, turning with a smile to meet him, while she held her finger to her lips to warn him to silence, because their little one was sleeping! This very picture as he saw it now, yet *something* was so different that the poor squire was fain to steady himself against the door he held, before he could advance.

There sat the young, slight figure, clad in heavy black, the pale face wearing a smile more sad to see than any tears, as her eyes turned, bright and vacant, to her husband's face. There was the finger on the parted lips to bid him not to wake the baby; and the other gentle hand lay on the little head—so motionless now.

The room was darkened, yet this picture seemed to burn before the squire's eyes, as he moved slowly towards the little bed.

"Hush! He is dead," said Nora, softly, with the strange smile upon her lips. "See! he lies so still and quiet, and I think he knew me at the last, and—thanked me; or—was it Drury? I—forget. I have been with him all the time, night and day. No one has done anything for him but myself. That was right, for I was his mother—No; that was *your* boy, not mine. Where—was mine?"

"Nora," entreated the squire, falteringly; but she silenced him gently, with the old lifting of her finger to her lips.

"You sent for me. Why? It was too late when I came—too late. You said it was I who sent for you too late. Do you remember? Hush! He sleeps peacefully. You meant me to come in time; I know you did. Yes, I know you did. Please to let me sit with him. You will be very kind, because you know what it is to lose a child you love. *He* died loving and grateful to you; he died even with your name upon his lips; and—just for that once—with his last breath it was—he called me *mother*, smiling. Ah! he had not smiled for so long, poor Drury! Smiling as if he said it was not age that signified, but that I had loved and cared for him, and been just a little to him what his own mother might have been. Are you crying—crying? *You!* I never saw you cry before. You forget that he was quite happy—forgiven. He said it again and again; he was forgiven, he said, and died in faith—so humble and so steadfast!

"But *my* darling lay in this dim silence wondering why his mother did not come; because he must have known how precious she used to be to him. So precious! And, when he was weary of wondering, he drew one little gasping breath—How cold it is! Perhaps the angels told him all about it as they carried him; and perhaps they would let him look back to see me

here—sitting here with him, though it was too late. And perhaps, even there, he feels what these kisses mean—his mother's kisses."

"Nora," faltered her husband, trying to raise her as she poured her passionate kisses on the little dead face, "will you come away from here—with me?"

In one moment she had risen and faced him, her eyes bright and feverish.

"You sent for me to see my boy," she said. "I came only to see him; then I shall go back. In simple pity, let me stay with him, even though I am too late for his eyes to look into his mother's, or his little gentle fingers to close just once again on hers. No, do not speak to me!" she cried, clasping her head in both hands when he tried to interrupt her. "My head is burning, and it is all indistinct and—growing dark, and cold, and——" One moment more she stood before him. "Oh! leave me here alone!" she cried; and in simple pity, as she had said—in simple pity only, for still thickly and heavily between them rose that cloud of suspicion and mistrust—he left her; never seeing how, one moment afterwards, the slight form reeled and fell.

Like a man in a dream, the squire wandered downstairs and into his own study, but he started back as if a ghost had met him when he saw a letter lying on the table, addressed to himself in Drury's writing.

"It was among his things," explained Miss Macnair, looking up for a moment, as she sat quite still beside the fire. "Nora brought them, I suppose, considering there was no danger of infection now. I unpacked them, and that sealed letter was in his desk. I brought it here at once."

Full keenly Miss Macnair sat watching her brother-in-law, as he read, but she knew he had forgotten her very presence long before he fell upon his knees and covered his face.

"Oh, God!" he whispered in a low voice of intense contrition, "punish me!"

All the wisdom Caroline Macnair possessed came to her aid just then, and she sat in utter silence, waiting for this heavy tide of penitence to sweep by. No wonder the time seemed to her so long before her brother rose, and, without seeming to see her, quickly left the room.

Her hand shook inexplicably when she took up the letter he had dropped. What must it be to have wrought such a change in him? It was a change she could not understand, yet it seemed already to have banished that one look which had for months been deepening in his face.

The letter was not very long, yet minute after minute Drury's aunt stood with it in her shaking hands, slowly, very slowly, mastering its contents. At first the words were like a foreign language to her, then they danced and vanished as she tried to hold and fit them with a meaning; then, at last, they stood clear and horrible before her eyes, and she read them through, with beating heart and hurried breath.

"I write this, father,"—thus the letter ran, so unsteady as to be often almost illegible—"because I know that I am dying. I have thought death probable for many days, but this morning, for the first time, I allowed Nora to send for a physician. I *allowed* her—understand that, please, father, for it has been *her* earnest wish ever since she came to me, and more than once she has brought a doctor to my very door (when I have lain quiet after my delirium); and begged me to see him, promising that she would stand by and prevent——But you do not yet understand why I would see no one, nor am I able to write coherently even now that I have begun. It is not possible that I can recover, so this letter will reach you soon, and will tell you what perhaps Nora will, in her pure unselfishness, guard honourably as my secret still, to be buried with me. For, father, she has never guessed, never—God bless her for such trust in you, and even in me!—of that vile suspicion which I taught you to nourish against her; which, indeed, I or Aunt Caroline, in her mistaken loyalty to her sister's son, first implanted in your heart so subtly. But I am not even yet confessing, though I know my hours are numbered, and I have much to say.

"Nora, sitting in her constant place beside me, begs me not to write, and says that she will take you any message I give her, word for word; so little can she guess how you may look coldly upon her when all is over, and you are summoned here. But I know what the old suspicion was, against which you fought so hard, and I know that it will rise up with added strength, and strengthen another—worse still—when you hear how I lay here dying, and Nora admitted no one to my room. It is because I know this, and that I have made it easy for you to mistrust her, and as my only return for her goodness—I cannot write of that while her dear eyes look into mine with a smile so brave and compassionate, and her gentle hands wait to take this from me and to lay me back to rest—it is because I know what doubt may rest upon her motive, that I must write to you before I die. Father, do you guess what my confession is to be? It was I who unmoored and sent to certain destruction the boat in which Ernest lay asleep. It was I, your son and his twin brother! It was one moment's work only, and done after one moment's

thought. I heard the awful, tempting voice for just one instant, and in that instant the means lay to my hand. I stood and loosened the cord, and the boat glided on.

"From that moment my life has been a heavy dream, and I have often and often wondered *was* it I who did it? I have—for I have been insane many moments since then—recalled the day, and wondered *who* it was that stood on the river bank and so quickly unknotted the rope, then turned and sauntered amongst the trees, and lived through the endless agony that followed. I loved Ernest, father, though the words may sound like mockery now, and it was only the fear of an exposure of my college debts, which had brought me to that morbid and desperate state when the tempter could be all-powerful. If I were your eldest son, I knew my creditors would wait, and it was done in that one moment. Day and night I pray now that God will help all those who, in such a moment of horrible temptation, see the sin lying so ready to their hands.

"After that moment's yielding, the other sins followed easily; but to-night I can feel that even *you* will forgive me. Oh, my father, if you could hear my cry to you in my pain and penitence! Oh! father, though these words will read coldly, they are written through hot and blinding tears, and my cry to you for pardon for my one awful crime, and for the despicable insinuations which came so easily to me in my craven fear of detection, is wrung from a broken heart. Father, dear father,—always so kind to your boys, so loving and so generous, so gentle with their faults, giving them always yourself so noble an example—forgive me!

"I was obliged to leave this last night. Nora put it away for me, never glancing at it, but looking kindly into my eyes. To-night I think I can finish. I have so little more to say except adieu; and how can I say that? Perhaps God will be so pitiful as to let me see your dear face once again—the face that will be kind and loving because you will not know; but, if not, I shall have thought of you last of all, and longed for you most of all in the world; and died believing that we shall meet again; for Christ in His infinite compassion has taken even *my* sins upon Himself.

"My hand grows so weak, father. Nora saw me unfasten Ernest's boat; but, though I knew this, I had no fear of *her* turning your heart against your son. No fear. Not because I rightly guessed she would not believe it deliberately done, but because I knew her even then to be as true and pitiful as she has proved herself.

"When I felt this illness seizing me, and I knew I should be delirious, and that all would certainly be confessed in my delirium,

I came here, and—selfish ever—sent to beg Nora to come, because she had seen all I could betray, and (as I felt sure) would guard my secret still. I knew you were away, and I hoped the illness would not last. Indeed, I fully believed so then. She came, leaving her own child, even when he was suffering, and, knowing her, you know how she has fulfilled her pitying task.

“Earnestly and tearfully she, from the first, pleaded with me to send for you, and even still more for me to see a physician; but I knew he would insist on help for Nora, and my fear was too intense to admit another into my sick-room. I am sure, quite sure, father, that no physician could have saved me; but I dare say they will make a suspicious tale to you of Nora’s constant and solitary attendance on me. You will believe all, and understand all, when you read this.

“I can bear now at last to look into her pure eyes; and oh, father, it is such a joy to me to feel that she does not know, and never will know, the vile suspicion which I tried to inculcate, when for *myself* I feared those doubts and innuendoes which escaped after the inquest. She has forgiven me all she knows, and I shall die with her hand in mine, thankful to feel how she and you, my father, will be happy in the dear old home, with the little one who will be so much better a son, and so much more worthy to take your place at last, than I should have been.

“Shall you be in time, my father? If not it will be my fault, not yours nor Nora’s, for she has begged me every day, almost every hour, to let her summon you, and never until yesterday would I consent. Never until they told me I could not live. Farewell, father. Perhaps on your journey you are whispering (as you used to whisper so tenderly to us long ago) ‘God bless my boy!’ Ah, such a pleasant thought!”

Not again did Miss Macnair try to read the blurred, unsteady lines, but, like her brother, she fell upon her knees in the silence; and, though no words passed her trembling lips, perhaps even those broken sobs could reach the Mercy Seat and plead for pardon.

Through her long illness, Nora Sutton was nursed by hands as tender and hearts as loving as her own had been, and on the very day when the squire, in his long daily search, found the first snowdrops, he brought her down stairs, and let her lie and look out once more upon her beautiful home, “like a snowdrop herself,” he said, when she tenderly touched the blossoms with her lips.

A month later, the squire brought her the first spring rose, and, laying it beside her cheek, told her, in the glad and tender voice of the old days, that the rivalry was just as great as it used

to be when she ran wild about the park with roses always in her flying hair; and he had loved her more than all the world, though he did not think he knew it then, any more than she did.

But, even as he said it, the squire knew that it was not the child Nora who had come back to him; nor would he have had it so. His wife now was so exquisitely precious to him that he could hardly believe in a time when he loved her only for her bright prettiness, and her girlish simplicity and true-heartedness.

Now the summer roses are in their fullest bloom at High Sutton, and Miss Macnair is wandering among them, a devoted but most serenely happy slave to her godson, the healthy little heir to High Sutton, whom even *her* boundless indulgence will not spoil.

Once again the squire and Nora are running a race, while their laughter flies among the trees, and a small competitor, running in advance, looks back with brilliant eyes and tangled locks, and claps her hands to see that she has beaten papa and mamma. And, when the race is over, the squire sets the tiny girl upon his shoulder, and, laughing down into his young wife's face, asks her if she will kindly try to recollect that he is an elderly man.

To which Nora answers most sedately that it is impossible, and then draws down his handsome face and kisses it, pulling the baby's yellow locks the while.

And presently Miss Macnair, who meets them and brings her little favourite to join the game, wonders, for the hundredth time, if ever anyone can pretend to decide *what* will prove an "unequal marriage."

BACK TO THE OLD HOME.



CHAPTER I.

LEFT ALONE.

THE Hall stood in an opening among the trees, much farther up the valley than the low old farm, where I—a very lonely lad in those days—lived and worked under uncle Joshua's iron rule; and only from the gate of the hill orchard could we see the wide, grey house and the smooth emerald lawn before it.

Even from there it always looked very far away, I thought, quite as if it belonged to a different world. Indeed I liked to fancy that it *did* belong to a different world from mine, and that no sorrow and no unrest could enter it. It often did me good to stand there beside the gate and look at it, though I knew uncle Joshua would have called this a childish fancy, and thought that it made me idle over the tasks he gave me, or impatient over his hard and moody silence or reproof. But I think those few quiet minutes now and then—while I dreamed over the peace, and joy, and refinement of this beautiful home, of which, beyond its soft grey walls, I knew almost as little as I knew of the blue sky above me, and while I forgot the loneliness and want of love and pleasure in my own home—did me no harm.

I used to love the picture best by moonlight, but of course I could see it very seldom so. Oh, the great peace that lay upon it then, while I could fancy Miss Mary gliding noiselessly about the quiet rooms, or standing by the mullioned windows, singing softly, in the deep gladness of her heart! But was there a time when I could not picture her? When the sunset light burned on the windows, I saw her sitting at the organ, the notes of which I had sometimes heard, dressed in white, and looking like the angels my mother used to tell me of. And when I could pause beside the orchard gate on winter evenings, and see the firelight shining from the windows out into the night—like the great, warm, generous heart of the old Hall—in a hundred different

attitudes I could picture Miss Mary, flitting about the lighted rooms in dazzling robes like a fairy princess, reading in the fire-side glow with her head bent above most wonderful pictures, or dancing in a scene of sweet, unreal enchantment.

But—ah, yes, it might have grown into an idle and unboyish habit, as uncle Joshua said it was! Uncle Joshua had in charity given the orphan lad a home, and it was but natural that in return he should expect the lad's whole time in service, thus I had always answered the question of my life, trying to leave every wider question undiscussed, in my reticent, dogged way. So I tried very hard to leave this habit off. It was slow work though, and I never quite succeeded until Miss Mary herself surprised me there, on that first really happy day of all my boyhood.

I was standing in my old attitude, looking along the valley to where the great grey house caught all the sunshine, and, in a moody, tired way I was comparing the life within it (framed in wealth, and ease, and luxury) with my daily existence here at the farm, where uncle Joshua and I worked against a gloomy background of silence and labour, and where every day was darkened for me by my own consciousness of ignorance. I had been that morning chafing more than ever against the life I led, and wondering if the lads I knew, who had mothers and sisters, could ever feel as I did; when suddenly she came up across the meadow to that very gate whereon I leaned in my discontent, and my eyes were so fixed upon the house of which I loved to dream, that I never heard or saw her till she was close upon me. Then——

But never since—not even in the evening before that very day was dead—could I recall it all exactly as it must have happened: this first step of mine into a new life where that unacknowledged weight of ignorance and self-mistrust was to be taken from me.

She had come across the meadows, she said, fancying that, by trespassing a little, she could strike into the park eventually by a new way. And I—my cheeks flushing like a girl's while she spoke to me—opened the orchard gate, and asked her, with my hat in my hand, if I might go with her, because, along the nearest way of all, there were palings to climb.

She smiled a little as she looked down upon the farm lad; and I, too proud of winning that smile to care what could have called it forth, stood waiting for her permission to guide her—waiting very anxiously, as she could surely see. For a moment she hesitated, looking around her as if she wished that she could find her way alone; then, with another glance into my face, she seemed suddenly and quite willingly to make up her mind.

"If you can spare the time," she said, with that smile which

for years from that day was to be to me the most beautiful thing the world contained, "I would like you to come. We need not hurry, and you shall take me—*not* the very nearest way of all where there are palings to climb."

I do not know how it happened. It was by some kind and clever way of her own, and in her gentle sympathy, that she found out how the young farm lad, who walked so shyly beside her, was longing for something that should make life more to him than a mechanical and spiritless, and soulless, round of toil. I never said so to her, Heaven knows, but I felt it so, many and many a time—a soulless routine, only of hunger earned and hunger satisfied.

And, when she had learned of this want she was not vexed, but even led me on to talk, until the reticent, old-fashioned lad had let her see the longing which he himself did not even comprehend.

And—I cannot tell what she said in that first bright hour of my life, but from that day she taught me herself, and her great kindness and her sympathy satisfied the craving that I never before had understood. And when she knew of those vague, unreal castles the solitary-natured lad loved to build, she never laughed nor rebuked him, but gave him deeper thoughts for their foundation, and led him on, by slow firm steps, to choose and hold the highest and the best of all.

How differently the days sped for me now! Though my hours of labour on the farm were not shortened, yet they were all different, brightened by the memory of her last lessons, lightened by the anticipation of the next, gilded by one certain lesson she had taught me from the first, wider and brighter and higher than all the others.

I never questioned with myself why she could take this trouble with me, because I instinctively knew then (as I know now) that it was her nature to be kind and brave and helpful to all.

I was now constantly supplied with books, chosen for me by Miss Mary herself (the squire's daughter was always called Miss Mary among us, I suppose because there had been an elder sister who died), and in these I revelled to my heart's content. All the more eagerly—ah, and so much the more happily!—I studied them, because I knew Miss Mary would talk of them with me afterwards, and so soften both my thoughts and judgments with the bright thoughts and gentle judgments of her woman-nature. Patiently and pleasantly always she brought her knowledge to the level of my understanding, and so somehow I never felt awkward or ignorant with her.

For two whole years I had led this new and happy life, broken

only by Miss Mary's absences from the Hall, when one day she told me, in the light way she always mentioned her own great kindness, that I had gone so far beyond my teacher that she should lose all her credit unless she got help, and therefore that she had won our curate's consent for me to read with him every night for an hour.

At first—grateful as I was to Miss Mary for this kind thought—my heart fell, because I knew it would be different when I could not feel that the books I read so hungrily had been chosen for me by Miss Mary herself; but I soon found that she was still helping me, though she had so kindly won me a step she could not give. Long afterwards I knew that she had paid our curate generously for those lessons for me, but I did not guess of that then. I suppose I believed that to him, as to me, it would be pleasure enough to do anything at Miss Mary's bidding.

It was just one year afterwards that a rumour reached us at the farm (no news or rumours reached Uncle Joshua and me until they were old elsewhere) that at Christmas-time Miss Mary would be married to Major Western, a gentleman who was very often staying at the Hall. The news at first came like a blow to me; then I discredited it, for Major Western, handsome as he was, never seemed to me to be near enough to Miss Mary for this thought to come to me. But afterwards I knew how blind I had been, for now I seemed to see a hundred proofs of Miss Mary's love for him; and, though of course I—a lad of fifteen—could not understand this love, never having witnessed it before, it had a strange effect upon me, especially perhaps as I never could like Major Western. Though he always spoke to me even as if he took an interest in me, when I and he were in Miss Mary's presence together, I knew he did it only to win her favour; and I missed the sympathy which she herself had unconsciously taught me to distinguish.

He had left the army, and was reported to be very rich, yet there was a report too that the squire did not willingly give his consent to Miss Mary's marriage; but I only wondered was there anyone in the world to whom the squire could willingly give his only child?

So time went on, and the sight of Major Western's appropriation of Miss Mary, and her thoughtful love for him—the love always trustful, always unsuspecting—hurt me in a strange, acute way, while I let my old selfishness creep around me once again, and even went back to my moody dreaming, picturing her happiness among her guests at the Hall, while I felt as isolated in the lonely farm as if the sea had rolled between the houses.

Yet, on the very day before her marriage, Miss Mary rode

down to the farm, without any of her guests and friends—without even Major Western—just to bid me good-bye. It ought to have brightened my own heavy eyes to see how bright hers were, yet I knew I met her with such a worn and gloomy face that I quite well understood what she meant when she laid her gentle hand upon my shoulder and bade me leave off studying late at night.

“I shall never care to study now, Miss Mary,” I said, not even able to look up into her face, as I stood beside her horse.

“Remember, John,” she said, putting aside her own happy thoughts, as she walked with me to the house, “what pleasure, in the years to come, this study will prepare for you. And what a noble life yours may be, if you are still earnest in your efforts to make it so!”

She stayed with me a long time that morning, in spite of all the guests and gaiety at the Hall; and I think even to this day I remember all she said, and can in fancy see her sitting there in the old deep window-seat, with the winter sunshine on her hair; talking to me of our lessons together, of the books we had read, and then—ah, so earnestly and with such trust in me!—of what she felt my life would be.

Thank heaven that I dare still recall every one of her dear words!

“Miss Mary,” I said, when we had gone out to the gate again, and I was looking wistfully over to the woods that hid the Hall, while, before she mounted, she held my hand in hers, “if, in the years to come, my life can bring a blessing into any other lives, as you have said, it will be only because you yourself have brought a blessing into it. For everything you have been to me, I—I would thank you if I could.”

“You have,” she said, looking at me kindly before she dropped my hand.

Then I tried to bear it all a little better, as I should—I whose life could have no further union with hers!

“I will leave your books at the Hall this evening, Miss Mary,” I said, stooping to assist her to mount. “I will never forget all they have taught me—they, with your long, long patient help.”

“Keep the books, John, please. Keep them all,” she said, smiling down upon me from her saddle. “All the while I am away, I shall be glad to feel that you have them to remind you of our old studies—and of me.”

I did not tell her how little I should ever need anything to remind me of her; it was not one of those thoughts that will form themselves into words, and—oh, how ashamed I was afterwards whenever I recalled this!—my answer to her last good-bye

was broken by a tearless, passionate sob. So, though I tried so hard to watch her to the last as she rode down the narrow lane, I could not see her for the mist before my stupid eyes.

Yet it was something to hear her horse stepping so slowly along the frosty ground, for I fancied I could *hear* that she was thinking of the desolate one she had left behind, and whose heart she had taken.

For many and many a day after that, my books were dull and toneless and my work so wearisome that even uncle Joshua was roused to wonder, and to bid me "walk more, and go to bed at earlier hours."

CHAPTER II.

WRECKED.

YEAR after year passed without bringing the squire's daughter back to her home. Perhaps the squire sometimes met her in London; but even this I doubted when I saw how the brave old face grew anxious and troubled, and the tall form bent and listless through those three solitary years. How could I ever doubt (seeing how each month wrought a change in him) those painful rumours which sometimes reached us of the life that Major Western led abroad, and of the constant demands made upon the squire, his daughter's husband? We all saw how this told upon him in his solitude at the Hall, and how, after every absence, he came back more bowed and worn, more hasty and impatient, less like the cheery, gentle squire whose home life had been so happy in the old days.

He never strolled down to the farm for a few minutes' chat with uncle Joshua, or to laugh with him over the old joke of my uncle's fabulous savings, as he used; he never now stopped me, when he met me, to speak a few kind words to the lad to whom his daughter had been so kind.

Life seemed all changed for the kindly, brave old man, and, though we did not know of it at the time, the steady, gradual drain upon the estate, and the disgrace he felt it for himself, as well as for his daughter, to be allied to a professional gambler, were a weight he could neither shake off nor bear. And so, by the end of those three short years, he laid it down in utter weariness, and with it the active, simple blameless life.

It was only then, when her father lay dead, that Major Western brought his wife to her old home once again. But they stayed only until the funeral was over, and I do not think that

in any way Major Western cared to consult either the feelings or wishes of any of the late squire's friends or tenants, though we were all there, paying our last respects to one we had always loved as well as honoured.

Yet, upon the sad day she set out on that swift journey back, Mrs. Western came to the old farm to bid me good-bye, and in her own arms brought her little baby-girl. How sadly I contrasted then, with the bright face of my young teacher three years before, the pale, pathetic face of the young mother, who seemed to have lost even all memory of that radiant smile I used to think the brightest thing on earth, except that its shadow dawned upon her grave, sad face just once; just for the moment while her baby lay contentedly in my careful, awkward arms.

Soon after Major Western had taken his wife back to his old life in Paris, my uncle Joshua died, and I felt myself lonelier than ever at the old farm, through it grew and improved rapidly now, for my uncle had left me the accumulated savings of his whole lifetime, and I found that the squire's jest had truth beneath it.

After that first and last visit of Major Western and his wife, the old Hall was closed for quite three months, when one day my eyes fell on an advertisement, inserted by Mr. Needham, the family lawyer, offering the Hall for sale, and of course we knew by whose orders this had been done. Not long afterwards it seemed somehow to be understood amongst us (though I never knew who was first answerable for the news) that it was to be let, the sale having been satisfactorily effected, but the purchaser having no intention of living there. Some said this purchaser was Mr. Needham himself, others that an eccentric young merchant had bought the house to retire to when he had made sufficient fortune to enjoy it, and had worked sufficiently to need rest. But no one asserted anything as quite certain, and so the rumours reached me only in a vague surmising way.

So the years went on, until ten had passed since the day Miss Mary had bidden me good-bye at the farm, on the clear winter morning before her marriage. Never, through all that time, had I entertained a thought of marriage, and somehow my solitary nature and solitary habits (increased so greatly by my solitary life) seemed to save me from those jests and reports of marriage so usual, I think among young people in a quiet country life. Ah, but I never was a young man—never until——

I knew why no thought of marriage had come to me as it comes to most men. Years ago—unconsciously, perhaps—I had enshrined an ideal in my heart, so perfect, so all sufficing even in its dreamy unreality, that my heart cried for no lesser. Yet

even so—thanks always to her teaching!—my life was not an isolated nor quite a useless one.

The Hall was occupied now by a widow lady with her son and daughter, Mrs. Fortescue renting it from the absent proprietor. Young Mr. Fortescue was at Eton, but of course at home a good deal. He was a handsome, rather sociable young fellow, whom we soon grew to like; his sister had still her foreign governess, but she looked almost grown up even then, a peculiarity which always struck me even more than her very stylish appearance and rather haughty and ungracious manners. But sometimes I pulled myself up sharply in my judgment of her, remembering that I might be unfair, because it was so all impossible to me patiently to see any other young lady take the place Miss Mary once had filled.

Still the tenants were, I believe, pretty well contented now with “the family” at the Hall. Though they were not the old squire and Miss Mary, and though it was spitefully whispered that the late Mr. Fortescue had been a Glasgow tradesman, young Mr. Fortescue had such a pleasant way with him, and seemed so anxious to belong to the place (as a country gentleman should), that at last we grew to speak of him quite naturally as “the young squire.”

So ten years went by, as I said, and for seven of them we had neither seen nor heard of Major and Mrs. Western, when one day Mr. Needham sent me a French newspaper with one paragraph marked round with red ink. It was rather hard work for me to translate this French, because it seemed different from the French I had mastered in Miss Mary’s books, but gradually the meaning lay clear and plain before me—the cruel meaning of it all.

I read the paragraph again, slowly through from beginning to end, yet all the while I followed the words my eyes seemed only to see the young mother who, seven years before, had smiled with such a sweet, pathetic smile when her baby’s arms went softly round my neck at the farm gate.

The French paragraph told but little (as I knew afterwards) of the long course of selfish indulgence, of reckless extravagance, of systematic gambling, and professional fraud. But it told at length—and with cruel elaboration in every detail—how the career of dissipation had been cut short by the hand of the self-murderer.

That night I had a vivid and most painful dream. In this dream I knew myself to be in a strange country, without knowing what country it was; and, though the scene around me was so unfamiliar, I knew exactly how and where to go, and went on alone, unquestioning and unquestioned, until I found myself

before a closed door. Then it seemed as if I paused, seeking courage to pass beyond; and I can feel even now as I write, so many long years afterwards, the sort of self-pity with which I saw my fingers trembling upon the handle of the door.

The room I entered in this dream of mine was barely furnished, and half darkened; but to me, standing within the door unseen, it was its one solitary occupant which made the whole picture so sad and so pathetic. White and worn and feeble, like a shadow of her old self, Miss Mary sat there in the utter solitude of deep thought, the eyes that used to be so beautiful, hollow and weary now, as they were fixed upon the empty grate. Presently, while still I watched in silence with my hand pressed on my heart, I saw her rise as if in sudden determination, and, opening a desk upon the table, begin to write.

Conscious in some way of my own invisibility to her, I came up to her side and read as she wrote; for I seemed to know this was a letter to myself. Ah, what sad and pleading words they were! And yet I could not understand what was the something which she sought of me. I read every word again, as Miss Mary leaned her head upon her hand and rested; but no; the vague, pitiful words, so humble, so pleading, bore no distinct meaning to me, except that one prayer came from her heart on this sad day, and that she felt that I could satisfy it.

It did not seem strange to me, in my dream, that, while I could so easily read every word she wrote, I could not grasp the real meaning of her letter.

When it was finished, the heavy eyes of the writer followed it slowly, line by line, word by word, while her tears fell heavily upon it. Then there was a long pause, while she held the letter in her hands closely and tightly, and there grew a restless, feverish pain upon the young, wan face. The silence was broken by a sob—ah, such a passionate, breathless sob!—and Miss Mary rose, put the letter into the empty grate, and set light to it, turning away with her eyes covered, while it burned to ashes.

So wonderfully real this dream was to me, even next morning, that it seemed all one with the resolution I had made to go at once to Paris. Miss Mary wished for me, and needed me—that was quite clear to me—and I did not pause to question with myself whether this consciousness ought to move me, based only on a dream. I felt no anxiety about leaving the farm, for I had a clever bailiff now, and I did not dread the journey, though I had never before been beyond the neighbouring counties. All was lost in my engrossing anxiety to reach Paris. I did so next morning; then, driving rapidly, and sparing no labour of inquiry,

I reached, within an hour, the house where Major Western lay dead. But his wife was not there. She had not lived with him (so the woman who kept the house where he had died, and where at first they had lived together, told me in answer to my quiet, earnest questioning) since she had, by a trial in which he was concerned, discovered how his wealth was gained. Mrs. Western had never known, unfortunately, the woman said, until her own property was all squandered.

Since then she had lodged elsewhere with her little daughter, and had earned (it was said), by giving lessons, a livelihood for herself and her child. But lately—so the woman had gathered from casual remarks of Major Western's servant—Mrs. Western had been too ill to leave her room. She used to live here with her husband, when in Paris—so the woman went on, detaining me against my will—and she was pretty then, and bright and generous; but that was a long time ago, and she had begun to change and pine almost directly.

Her doctor had been in about Major Western's funeral, but she herself was far too ill to come, even if she would have forgiven the past, and done so.

It was a pitiful story of a husband's sin and a wife's fruitless sorrow, and I was very glad when it was over and I was on my way again. I had only been able to discover the street in which Mrs. Western lived, and so I took each house as I reached it, determining not to miss one chance, because time was so precious to me.

At last I found the right house, and was taken softly to the door of the quiet, shadowed room where she lay. For a minute I stood unseen, just within, almost as I had stood in my dream; but the whole scene was different, and I seemed to forget my dream just then. I only saw the sad, sad scene before me.

The young mother lay breathing faintly and rapidly, her head raised upon the pillows which a little girl had propped as high as she could and supported against her own tiny form, as she knelt behind her mother, watching her face wistfully the while, and softly stroking one thin, white hand. Ah, such an anxious, troubled look it was for the face of so young a child! And there was almost a woman's grave and tender care in the soothing, quiet action; such patient strength, too, in the unmoved, steady posture.

But, when I looked into the mother's eyes, that mist came again before my own, just as it had once before blotted out that face when it had been my teacher's.

She tried hard to speak to me, but the weakness was too great

in that dying hour, and I could not help her in this terrible suffering of my own. And so the precious minutes passed, but I had lifted the child from her cramped position, and I myself supported the weak form which I had last seen so young and beautiful and full of life.

But the little one, though released, crept to her mother's side, and with a tenderness quaintly protecting, and without a word, slipped one arm round her mother.

Above the little face, so like her own, Mrs. Western's yearning eyes sought mine; and at that moment I sounded the very depths of her speechless anxiety for her child. The question she would not write to me, the question she could not speak, I read now in that slow, sad gaze—so pitiful, so humble! I put my arms about the tiny, slender figure of her child, and drew it to me—drew it even from the mother's side—while a new look dawned upon the beautiful, dying face; a look even painful in its speechless gratitude.

Falling upon my knees beside the sofa, and laying one hand upon the child's head, and the other upon the mother's wasted hand, I promised I would love and cherish the little one always—always.

Ah, the mother knew how solemnly this vow of mine came from my grateful, sorrowful heart! She could hear its truth and earnestness, there on the borderland where *all* is true. She could see now all that she had been to me so long, and all that I, in humble gratitude, would be to her little one.

She saw—ah, who, who can tell how much she saw in that clear light so near the end?—for a wonderful smile lit up the dying eyes, and made them beautiful and glad.

CHAPTER III.

A CHILD NO MORE.

WE lived a life of quiet happiness at the old farm, the child and I, and gradually there died from my mind the haunting fear I had had, that she would fret and pine in the dull house, with no child-friend, no companion save a man who had been all his life used to solitude and silence. Such fear, though a natural one, could not live in her presence; for though there were times when coming unexpectedly upon her in the twilight, I found her eyes full of tears, and though sometimes in church, as we knelt together, I heard a little catching in her breath, as if a babyish sob, had to be stifled, I knew this was natural to the little motherless

child. And she had always a smile to greet me with, and a bright answer for every one of my endless anxious questions. So, as I said, there died the great fear that she could never live happily without a child-friend or a mother's care.

She was never shy with me, even from the first. Once, when I spoke of this, long afterwards, she said could that have been possible, after she had seen the smile of perfect trust and contentment her mother had given me, when I had taken her first into my care?

How proud I was of my fairy child! Was she ever one hour out of my thoughts through all the livelong day? I had some one to care for now; I had some one to work for; some one to share the solitary old home now; and, for her sake, it must be bright and pretty. I grew a very child myself in seeking a child's amusement; I felt almost young myself in my intense desire to understand the young; and at last I grew almost wise in choosing what would be the best and brightest and pleasantest for my little one. How I remember with what care I chose the girl who was to attend upon little May (her name was Mary, like her mother's, but she told me she never remembered being called anything but May; and I was very glad, for her mother's name was sacred to me still), and how my housekeeper used to smile sometimes at the elaborate, careful orders of the master who used to be utterly indifferent to little household matters! But there were times, for all this new found interest of mine, when I used to watch the pretty little figure moving softly in the dark old rooms, and sorely and regretfully allow that, however anxious I might be over the task, I had no right to take upon myself the guidance of a creature such as this. Care, of course, I might bestow upon her—care and love untold; but for guidance and teaching——

Why she would be a woman some day, and have to go from this quiet farm to act a woman's part in that wide, unknown world, the sunshine of which only such natures as hers could make. And could she go with only such guidance and teaching as I could give her?

At last all the doubts and fears resolved themselves into one momentous question, which was before me ever, night and day—how was my little one to be educated? She seemed to be growing taller every day, and must she not now need wise and womanly teaching? If so, she must have it, even if the old farm is left to me desolate again.

"I wonder——"

"What are you wondering? I think you are always wondering now, John."

I had taught her from the first to call me so. How could I resist the temptation, when there was no one else in all the world to call me by my Christian name, and when it was so doubly sweet to me from those small lips, which had been the first within my memory to cling to mine?

She was sitting now in her favourite position on my knee, her tiny fingers stroking away the lines in my face.

"I was wondering about your education, dear."

"You have wondered about that before," the child said, folding her hands. "Will you settle it now please, John? Then you needn't wonder again."

"Then you must help me, dear," I said, without a smile for her little comical attack of gravity.

"Yes; of course. How were you educated, John? Who taught you?"

This was a little respite, that was all; so I enjoyed it.

"Your mother first; then our curate; then myself."

"I see," said May, laying her cheek softly against mine, as she almost always did at my mention of her mother. "Then I will have the same teachers exactly. First my mother (of course it was); then our curate—if you like; then you. That's all settled, isn't it, John? Will the curate be the same who taught you?"

"Hardly, dear, seeing he is a rector now, and living hundreds of miles away from here. Your teacher must be the new curate who comes next week—if we decide upon that."

"Oh, we have decided it!" said May, again folding her hands demurely. "I must be taught exactly the same as you were, John, then we shall be just as clever as each other."

Original and questionable as the idea was, I still felt it was a great relief that my darling had not chosen to go away from me, or even asked for a lady to teach her at home.

So it was settled to be as she said (everything at the farm now was always done as she said), and on the next Sunday, when our new curate read himself in, I could plainly see that May was most gravely studying him as her future preceptor. I can remember, even now, how the sun rays touched my child's bright hair that morning while she sat so still in the corner of our big pew, with her hands folded, as she had a trick of folding them, and her questioning, earnest eyes upon the young preacher's face. And yet, though it was some one else whose words she followed, some one else who had interested her, I think I had never before felt her quite so near to me, quite so entirely my own—but then that morning she was but a little child, and her world contained so few beside myself.

Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days.

I loved that text which the young man had chosen, and every word of his sermon sank into my heart; while the one vague, wordless hope it gave me only my Father in Heaven knew.

"John," said my child, walking, on her homeward way, beside me, both her hands locked round my arm, "that verse was one mother loved. She would have liked all Mr. Leslie said. Did you?"

"Yes, dear."

"Mother told me often exactly what it means," said May, in her childish gravity, and with that touch of sadness in her voice that told the story of her infancy, and which, I feared, she would never lose. "Ever such a crumb would do, she said, if we are poor, and haven't more; and still there will come back a great, great deal. You think so, too, don't you, John?"

Ah, the wide, vague thoughts which my little one, with all her pondering, could not touch! Patience for the "many days," whether they tell a lifetime, or only a portion of it, and—through them all—God's will be done!

A few days afterwards Mr. Leslie began his new duties as May's teacher, and I think that he had very often found them rather hard; for, in spite of her fitful gravity, lessons seemed to her very unnecessary interruptions to her day's enjoyments; and, in spite of this being her own proposal, she soon let it be very evident to him that she declined to recognise any authority save mine.

"What more natural," I said, to myself, with a sigh, "than that she should obey her staid, unyouthful guardian?"

Yet Leslie enjoyed his task too. I saw that, almost from the first; and, as the years went by, he grew to enjoy it more and more, until I felt sure that, above the tasks of all his weekdays, this task of teaching May was pleasant and delightful to him, and that, from his being teacher, it had come to pass that he himself was being taught.

CHAPTER IV.

THE UNDERCURRENT.

It came upon me suddenly, one lovely morning when the summer world around me looked just as it did upon that morning when Miss Mary first found out the craving of my lonely boyhood. The noise of the rooks in the old avenue (mellowed and familiar though it was) had given May one of her transparent excuses for putting away her Schiller, and telling Leslie that as she could not hear his corrections, it would be safer for her to give up

reading for the day. She rarely let any excuse escape her to be out of doors on these summer mornings, even when Mr. Fortescue did not come strolling to the farm, to loiter there as he so often did for an unwarrantable and unconscionable time, and so of course I was not surprised when she came dancing out to me, with a low, exultant laugh over Leslie's defeat, and a glad greeting for the young squire, who stood beside me, rather tired of having so long pretended not to be watching for her coming.

It had not come upon me yet, but that morning my eyes were to open suddenly to the consciousness that my little ward was a woman. I had not fully grasped the knowledge yet, but later on that morning it was to be given me beyond my power of losing it again. Going about the farm with me—always with me just as she did when a tiny child—with the same snatches of old songs, and the same coaxing words upon her lips, and smile and sunshine in her eyes, how should I guess that others saw a change in my darling, until it was shown to me so plainly?

We had all been chatting together on the one old twisted seat upon the lawn, when May ran into the fruit garden to gather us some strawberries, and Mr. Fortescue of course went with her. I had the *Standard* in my hand, and had been now and then reading aloud to them, especially enjoying May's quaint remarks; while in the interval the three young people talked. But now I put my newspaper down upon the seat, as Leslie was with me, and began to talk with him, wondering a little though, in that first moment, why he had not, as usual, followed May.

I soon understood why, and I soon saw I need not trouble myself for subjects to carry on conversation. With scarcely any hesitation, with only a restless movement of his fingers, and a flush upon his face, showing how he felt the words, he asked me for permission to woo my child.

Thus it was that on that summer morning it came upon me unawares that my darling was a woman. Leslie's was a long story, I think; so I had time for other thoughts—besides one mad and selfish one—before I saw him looking at me, waiting eagerly and hopefully for my answer. My child was a woman now, to be wooed and won, to choose another home, and to be its mistress in a sweeter, dearer way than she could be mistress here at the old farm, which without her——

Thought would go no further in its sudden weakness. My darling was a woman. That was all I had heard or understood in Leslie's words. Ah, how cruel sounding they had been, in spite of their ringing burden of manly, tender love! My dear was old enough to leave me now. It was natural for her to govern and gladden another home, and she had no further need

of me. Her husband would be her guardian now. Surely the change had come all suddenly, upon this summer morning, as a storm breaks sometimes in a brilliant sky. Surely it could not be that such a loneliness as this had been gradually and imperceptibly closing around me, ever since that day, when with her warm, soft arms so tight around my neck, I brought her first to the old farm, and made it for the first time seem like home.

"I am afraid I seem impatient in repeating the question, Mr. Fearne; but your consent would give me such hope and courage."

Repeating the question? What question had Leslie repeated, unheard by me? Had he told me anything except that my darling was ready to leave me? Was that not enough to tell me in one day? If he had more to say, would it not do to tell me presently, when I had grown accustomed to this new thought?

"If you will only give your consent to my paying my addresses to Miss Western."

I picked up the *Standard*, and opened it, then folded it on my knee, in a deliberate, leisurely way; but all the time my pulses throbbed, as even Leslie could never have felt his do, through all that history he had given me of his love. And my lonely heart beat as if it had not learnt, years and years before, what utter loneliness meant.

"I give you my consent. Why should I withhold it?"

"Thank you, thank you, a thousand times! And you wish me success in my suit?"

Success! Wish him success, when his success meant a desolate home and future for myself! No; my dry, unsteady lips would not have formed the words, even if my heart could have felt them.

"Plead your own cause, Leslie," I said, rising in utter weariness, and still in the great bewilderment and pain of my new awakening. "Could you ever doubt my earnest wishes for my child's happiness?"

"John," cried my darling, that moment running up to me, while I went towards the house, feeling strangely bent and spiritless, as I walked slowly in the mocking sunshine, "I have left Mr. Fortescue to finish gathering the strawberries. He has promised not to give up till the basket is full; and you and I are going to the dairy now for the cream. Mr. Leslie"—she beckoned to the curate over my shoulder, as we stood together—"please fetch the sugar, and then we shall be all ready."

"My dear," I whispered, "hadn't you better go with one of them?"

"I think not," May answered, in that pondering way of hers which was so quaintly characteristic of her, and so irresistibly

pretty on her bright young face. "I think I can trust either of *them* alone."

"And not me?" I questioned; but I drew my hand back, as it went so naturally around her in its old caressing way.

"Trust you alone, John," she queried, with raised eyebrows and puckered lips; "and in the dairy too? Oh, no!"

"Well," I said, as we walked on, she with her fingers locked about my arm, just as we walked together so many hundreds of times before—ah, so exactly as it had been from her babyhood, that now I might have thought the old times unchanged but for the haunting memory of what Leslie had shown me!—"what did the young squire think of your leaving him your work to do, May?"

"He won't find it any harder. He was working for both of us before. I only stood by and directed him."

"And did he like that?"

"He said so."

"And he asked you to stay, I suppose?"

I was only questioning her, because I dreaded my own silence and my own thoughts—just yet.

"Yes; he asked me to stay, of course. Indeed, I'm not quite sure whether he hadn't tears in his eyes. Don't you think it probable, John?"

"Very probable."

"I wonder you look sceptical on such a subject," my darling said, looking up into my face with a pretty pout, but, as I knew, with a questioning gravity in her eyes. "But you never could appreciate the value Mr. Fortescue sets upon me. He thinks me far more beautiful than the Queen of Sheba was when she came to dazzle Solomon, and far wiser than she was when she went away with all his lessons fresh on her mind. He says so, John, indeed, though you look as if I had invented it."

"Disputed authorship," I muttered, just as carelessly as I could; but my eyes were opening more and more, and my heart was sinking in spite of all the efforts I made to be glad—for my child's sake. The squire too had found out what I had been so blind to notice! He too knew that my pet was a woman to be wooed with flattery. He too was weaning her from me, loving her himself and longing for her. He too had learned the power of her beauty, the charms of her winning ways, and the wealth of her noble woman-nature. He too felt it was time she left this quiet home of mine, and had another home suited to her youth and beauty and gaiety. And he had wealth and luxuries to give her. Was it not time, indeed, that she left my covetous embrace, and this home, the only beauty and the only sunshine of which were of her own giving?

CHAPTER V.

"WHERE THE BROOK AND RIVER MEET."

THAT night I sat in the sad summer twilight, and watched my darling, as if I had been away from her for years. Had it not been as if I had, while she grew from childhood to womanhood unperceived by me? And I saw the change, for though it was the child-face still, in its sunny purity and innocence, that look of thoughtfulness (almost of care) that I sometimes saw there, and had always fancied was the never-extinguished trace of the sorrow of her childhood, might be the thoughtfulness of a woman, perhaps.

No; it was only to me that my darling was still a child. To others——

But how could I judge of her as others would? How could I bear to look, even for one moment, as a stranger would upon the girlish face and form guarded so sacredly in my heart? I tried, in this vain wish of mine, to see my child as others saw her, to compare her with other ladies I had seen; but who was there in our little world who ought to be compared with her? I said, my eyes resting happily upon the quiet figure standing near me in the twilight.

With all her riches and her high education, what was the young lady at the Hall besides Miss Mary's child, who had been nurtured only in the grim old farm, and educated so differently?

"It is her birth asserting itself," I thought, grateful that this humble life of mine, to which I had brought her, could not efface that. "Though Miss Fortescue has the home and wealth which should have been May's, she can never have her beauty and her grace."

But another thought followed soon, as I recalled the lessons this long day had taught me. Even the home and the wealth too may come back to Miss Mary's child, for was not the young squire as deeply in earnest as the curate? And would it not be a proud day for him, if he could take my pretty child as mistress to the home which had belonged to her forefathers for four hundred years?

"What is it, John?"

My darling, wondering perhaps at my long silence, had come softly up to me in the fading light, and stood looking down upon me with her wistful smile.

"Has Mr. Leslie been again complaining of me, John? Please, I should like to leave off my reading lessons now. I——"

"You what, dear?"

"I know as much as he does."

I could see that she expected a reproof or a jest, but, in my newly-acquired knowledge, I seemed to understand too much from that broken, half-defiant speech—that Leslie's love was no longer a secret from her.

"Leslie is a very good teacher, May," I said, scarcely knowing what to say, only glad at heart, I remember, that she knew of his love, and so need not learn it from any words and looks of mine. "I know no one who manages my little rebel better, or better deserves her respect. Indeed my dear——"

"My dear," mimicked May, screwing up her lips as she bent her sweet face close to mine, and put her hands upon my shoulder. "My dear, his lessons have grown very tiresome to me lately, and I want to leave them off."

In spite of her gay mimicry, a look almost of pain had stolen into her eyes. I felt that the few words were unusually earnest, and somehow I knew instinctively that I had better leave Leslie's cause in his own hands. I had given him permission to plead it when he would. But could I help wishing that, when my child should leave me, it would be to go back to her mother's home? Would she not soon be told by the young squire that this was the wish of his heart?

Next day Mr. Leslie heard gently from his old pupil that he could never be more to her than a dear friend; almost an elder brother, she said, with the tears filling her eyes, because she saw how little he had expected this reply, and how deeply he felt her quiet, sad refusal of his love.

CHAPTER VI.

FOR HER DEAR SAKE.

FROM that very day, with a strange persistency which grew out of my fear lest she should see what real pain the subject always gave me, because of the selfishness I could not overcome, I tried to get into the way of talking to May of Ernest Fortescue's hope, as if it were as pleasant a thought to me as it must be to her.

Mrs. Fortescue had now been dead about two years, and the young squire was five and twenty, therefore I felt how little reason he would have for any delay in winning for his wife the girl he loved. So, as I say, I gradually slipped into the way of talking to May about her future in the old home, and never did I let her guess of any pain this subject gave me; while

she received it every day differently, in a childish, wilful way, which I quite well understood, though she fancied that it skilfully hid from me all deeper feeling.

When we would pass the old Hall in our walks or rides together, I tried to speak of it as of a home from which she was only temporarily absent; and, if all this was done in selfishness, that I might prepare myself, and be saved from a great shock, she never guessed it was so. I used again and again to tell her how her mother loved the beautiful old house, and describe her favourite spots in the park and gardens. Then I would wonder, in quite an easy way, whether those nooks would be the favourites too of her mother's child. Sometimes, in that quaint, grave way of hers, May would discuss these fancies thoughtfully, as if they related only to some one in whom we took a mutual interest. Sometimes she would stop me, in a sudden, dignified way that was almost comic. Sometimes she would silence me pettishly and impatiently, blushing the while, in a nervous way that I understood; I was growing quick now to understand such signs.

I remember well the day on which I first felt able (without betraying what it would have distressed my child to see) to speak to her seriously about her future. It was in the summer twilight, and I remember how still the roses were around the open window, and how richly and daintily the scent of jasmine filled the quiet room. May had been singing to me in the fading light, choosing, of course, those songs she could remember without music or light, and the last she had sung had touched me strangely and inexplicably. It was not a new song, for I had heard her sing it many times before, and had even joined in it sometimes, improvising a bass, as May used to delight in my doing, all through those happy days before I knew that she was a child no more; and on that evening it seemed to have a new, sad, reproachful meaning for me. So I gently and gratefully took its lesson to my heart, before my child left the piano, and came back to her old place on the quaint, low chair I had chosen for her so long ago, and which always stood beside mine.

"May," I said then, without touching the pretty, bright hair, which it had been a silly habit of mine to stroke as she sat beside me thus in this quiet twilight hour, "that was a good little girl in your song; but I don't, all the same, think she was quite justified in disappointing her lover for the sake of her parents. Of course," I went on (I hope, just in my old straightforward way), "it is very pretty in a song for her to think of those who will miss her when she goes to her husband's

house, and for their sakes to bid him bide a wee. But in real life, my pet, his claim should have come first, however truly and sadly she could say :

‘And weel I ken they’d miss me, lad,
Gin I cam hame nae mair.’”

“I don’t think,” May said, slowly folding her hands on the arm of my chair, “that she could have done otherwise. In some cases it might have been different; but don’t you remember

‘They gave no thought to self at all,
They did but think of me’?”

“May,” I said, wondering a little over the great earnestness in her lifted face, and bringing in my answer rather hurriedly and even irrelevantly, “I have often feared that you did not think seriously enough over Mr. Leslie’s proposal to you. I wish I had been able to warn you what was coming. But I am a sleepy fellow, and had forgotten that my pet had grown into a woman. Now I know it, and can caution her sagely, bidding her remember that however pretty she may be, and however worth the winning, she has no right to go on winning the love of good men and never accepting it. There, dear, you must imagine me the ‘old folk,’ putting to you my view of the question; bungling over it, of course, or it would not be me.”

“Bungling—yes,” May answered, with that slow gravity of her childhood, “or it would not be you, John. And I am not to bungle again, I suppose, as I bungled in refusing Mr. Leslie.”

I could have fancied her jesting, but for the tell-tale blush which rose so slowly and softly in her cheeks, when her thoughts caught and held my meaning.

“Those old folk in the song ought to have had a word or two to say in the matter of their pet leaving them,” I said. “It is very hard upon us never to get a hearing. Now just suppose I were not allowed to say what I think about my pet going to live in her mother’s old home, with one whom her mother would so well have liked.”

Again that slow, bright blush spread over the face on which I gazed so anxiously—*only* anxiously, I trust, though my heart beat heavily in its love and longing.

“You like Mr. Fortescue better than you liked Mr. Leslie,” May said.

“Could Leslie have given my pet such a home as——”

“That is no answer,” May interrupted, with one of her rare flashes of petulance, though still she kept her seat beside me, and I tried not to fear any coming day when the low, pretty chair should stand near me vacant. “You never say you like Ernest

Fortescue for his own sake. If—if I ever tell you that I love him, John, it will not be for the sake of his home; it will be for—for himself."

"Of course it will, my child," I answered, knowing she would never learn how hard it was for me to say these things, and finding courage at last to lay my hand upon her head; "and it shall be a happy day for—both of us, as well as for him."

"Suppose the day never comes," she said, her eyes bright with laughter. "Now that you have settled everything, what shall I do if he never asks me—anything about the future mistress of the Hall?"

Then I laughed indeed, because he had taken such great, unceasing, and frequent pains to make his meaning plain to me when he came so very often to the farm, and had several times tried to ask me formally for my ward; but in vain, because I had, in my cowardice, put off the evil day.

"I think he will, dear," I said, trying after my usually quiet, practical tones, "and, when he does, I shall feel that I give you not only to a pleasant, clever man, but to a gentleman who, being in your own grade of life——"

"My grade of life!" May interrupted, tapping her foot impatiently upon the floor. "What does that mean, John? I am a farmer's child, and no one whom you hold above you is in my grade of life. That I was not born in this dear old farm, and that you are not like other farmers, makes no shadow of difference."

There was a little pause, which I could not bear to break, because it was filled so warmly by the memory of that time her words had recalled to me, when first a child's soft hand caressed me, and a child's lips lay upon my own. It was my pet herself who broke the pause at last, lifting her head from the arm of my chair, and looking straight into my eyes, a little defiantly perhaps, yet wistfully too.

"Those wise little bits of advice you give me, John, don't come a bit naturally from your dear old lips; and, when you tell me of those gorgeous visions you see of my future, your eyes don't seem a bit to see anything of the kind. I would not like to hint that you tell fibs, John, but—but—well, I think other subjects are more in your line. Are you so terribly afraid of having me too long upon your hands?"

"Dear, I am only afraid of keeping my——"

I broke off my speech in haste. It would have been the wildest that I had ever made to her, and never before had my voice shaken as it shook then in its suppressed passion. But I had said too little to betray me, and the gathering darkness hid

from her that brief flash of truth upon my face. She should have no pain of mine to bear, and even for myself, would it not be harder for me to let her go to her mother's home if she had guessed of the desolation she would leave in mine ?

CHAPTER VII.

TOWARDS THE OLD HOME.

"I CANNOT be surprised," poor Leslie had said to me, humbly and dejectedly, when he told me of May's refusal, "when I have such a rival as Mr. Fortescue. Independently of his really good qualities and personal attractions, it must of course be a great temptation to May to go and reign in the beautiful old home of her forefathers."

I had said it would be well and natural for it to be so, and I thought it too; for what other home was worthy of my darling ? And to whom could I ever give her so willingly as to the handsome, courtly gentleman who wooed her with such untiring earnestness ?

One thing I puzzled over a good deal. Thoroughly as May always enjoyed Mr. Fortescue's society at the farm, she never seemed to care to go to the Hall, though the invitations sent to her were constant and most persuasive. Sometimes they came ready for both of us, and then May always said she would go. So I tried to like the thought when she said that, and was generally to go with her, because she would enjoy it, though I was but dull company for Miss Fortescue when I got there. My thoughts were seldom in the present, for, if they were not resting on that past when Miss Mary had talked to me so kindly and so helpfully in the dear old rooms, they were ever trying to touch that future when my pet should call this home, and make it sweet and bright beyond all words; when she would be the cherished wife of a man who was her equal, and who would give her all which I would have loved to lavish upon her had I had it in my power.

That autumn the squire determined to give the village children a treat in his park. I know how the idea had first occurred to him on one of those days when he found May in the school-playground, starting the children at their games, as she often did, because our village school-mistress was lame; but no one could blame him if the plan did not originate solely in his desire to give the children pleasure, because he was so energetic and so happy over it, and laboured so very indefatigably to impress upon May the fact that he liked village school-children for their

own sakes alone. One thing I was glad to see; he did not tease May for advice, or make her the recipient of his plans. Perhaps his sister helped him, taking an interest in the feast because there were to be private guests too; but, in any event, May and I were only invited exactly as other guests.

I don't think it was cowardice—though I felt sure that, before this day was over, young Fortescue would ask my pet that question which I dreaded—that made me wish to stay away from the Hall that day. I think the old shrinking from society was coming back to me with the inevitable return to my old lonely life, which surely was prepared for me now. So I tried to take it for granted that May would go without me.

"Such things are so little in my way, pet," I said. "You will go without me this once?"

"No, John"

There followed no enticing or persuading. She pretended she was as willing to stay at home as I was, and though, for a moment, I longed selfishly that she should do so, knowing our happy days together were so nearly over, I could not let her. Should I keep my bird shut in this old cage with me, when her bright voice and face were longed for, and listened for so eagerly, in the wide, pleasant world beyond?

"But, May," I argued, "Miss Fortescue needs only young people about her. You will all race and dance and frolic, and make yourselves children among children. Of what use shall I be? I would rather stay away. I am more in my place here, darling."

There was no reply, while my child hummed a little over the new book she was cutting for me. It was utterly in vain to try to read her face, but as I was not comfortably certain of her acquiescence, I came round to the question again gently.

"You will be sure to enjoy yourself, my pet."

Still silence; an easy, contented silence.

"And I shall be here to receive you when you come home."

Still no answer, and, though I felt so troubled, I could hardly repress a smile, as, in that quiet, debonair way of hers (spoilt child that she was), she drove me to the question direct.

"You understand that I decide to stay at home, May?"

"Oh, yes!"

"You look forward"—I had come up to her side, and was stroking her hair softly, but I heard the wistfulness even of my own voice—"to enjoying the day, my darling, don't you?"

"Very much, John. I always do enjoy a quiet day at home with you."

I started from her almost guiltily. Had I been tempting her,

in my unconscious dread of our coming parting? Had I too plainly shown my own solitariness, that she—so bright and merry, and so courted ever among young people—should voluntarily (in her pity for me) forfeit this treat which I knew she would so thoroughly enjoy, and to which her very presence would give such extra pleasure?

"May, this is nonsense," I said, and turned quite away from her; "you must promise me to go."

"Not without you, John."

And then my darling's arms were round my neck, and her warm eyes were looking into mine; looking into mine with intense determination, yet with such laughter that I laughed too. Then my sullen mood vanished, and in another minute I had promised to go to the Hall with May, and had received my kiss of pardon.

So, when the day came, we walked together over the fields, May holding up the skirt of her new white dress in a way which filled me with conflicting feeling, the daintiness of it was so womanlike, her pride in the act so childlike.

"Are you sorry we came, John?" she asked, quite suddenly, as she sat down on the last stile, with certainly no appearance of haste.

Sorry! Was I ever sorry when she was with me?

CHAPTER VIII.

GATHERING SHADOWS.

QUIETLY and simply dressed as my child was, she shone pre-eminently in her grace and beauty among the guests we found clustered on the lawn, not quite knowing apparently whether they ought to venture among the school children, who had already begun to play in earnest among the trees of the park. But for herself May settled this question promptly in her generous, self-forgetting way, and by ones and twos the fashionable ladies sauntered in her wake, and—some easily, some awkwardly, but none ungraciously—they too joined, as my child did, in the simple merry games.

Mr. Fortescue hovered at her side, for his duties as host were not stringent in such a gathering as this; and presently, from following her lead, he grew to seem almost as much at home among the children as my darling did, and certainly, except herself, he did most and thought most for their pleasure and amusement.

I had great opportunities for noticing everything, for I could not join in all the younger ones did, though somehow—I suppose through knowing all the children and their parents, as of course I did, having lived all my life in the village—I had very few idle minutes. I noticed how the young squire was always near my child, yet that she never seemed to give him the opportunity of talking to her. Quite merrily always, yet persistently, and probably unnoticed by anyone save myself, she evaded any walking or conversing with him apart. Whether it was purposely or unconsciously done I could not be sure, but that it was so I was certain from the first. No sooner was Mr. Fortescue at her side, as he so often was, with his air of ready appropriation, than she would disappear. But it was only to start a race, or help a tiny child in the game, so who could wonder at her swift change of place, when her refusals to dance with the young squire were only that she might be partner to some shy country lad, or pair off two little children and start them in the step? In that quiet observance of her which had grown so natural to me, I saw all this; but I never wondered over it, because I knew that nothing would prevent my darling devoting this day to the children, not allowing her own pleasure to interfere in any way with theirs.

The afternoon games were over, and the children were having tea upon the lawn—waited on by many pairs of willing, dainty hands, while the Hall servants found their services all anticipated by their master and his guests—when I, standing a little apart, was joined by Miss Fortescue. I do not understand anything about ladies' dresses, but I remember to this day thinking, as she came towards me, how beautiful my child would look in such a dress, and—how soon it would be in her power to wear it.

"A curious scene," Miss Fortescue said, pausing beside me, and glancing across the lawn. "I should think, Mr. Fearne, that you never saw such an assembly here before."

"Twenty years ago," I answered, quietly and briefly, as I always spoke of those old times to anyone save May, "I often saw the children here, and all the villagers too."

"Twenty years ago!" Miss Fortescue repeated, with a polite, forced air of incredulity. "You mean when you were a little boy. Who entertained the poor people here then?"

"Miss Western's mother."

"Before she married Major Western?"

"Yes, certainly, Miss Fortescue."

"Mr. Fearne, is it not true that you saw Mrs. Western after her husband's death?"

"Once, yes."

So far I had thought her questions mere idle chat, carried on for my benefit, as we both stood apart idly watching the busy scene; but now, glancing down into her face, I saw something there which made my heart beat faster. She was troubled, and had come of her own will, to bring me this trouble. With her questions still ringing in my ears, did I not know that this trouble must touch my child? Without stirring a muscle, I yet felt as if I raised a hand to ward it off, as I asked Miss Fortescue some trifling question about the gardens.

"Will you walk with me?" she said, for all answer to my remark. "I should like to speak with you for a few moments where no one can overhear us."

Like a man in a dream, I offered my arm, and led Miss Fortescue down a quiet shrubby path on the outskirts of the lawn. For long minutes that seemed to me to tell an hour she kept silence; yet, though the silence seemed so long, I dreaded even the first word that should break it.

"You say, Mr. Fearn, that you saw May's mother after she lost her husband?"

Miss Fortescue had taken her hand from my arm, and sat down upon an iron seat in the shrubbery, signing to me to seat myself beside her; but I stood opposite, my arms folded, as if I could win strength by my stillness, and my eyes lowered among the dusky leaves, dreading to see upon her face any sorrow that my child might have to bear.

"Yes, I went to Paris the very day after I heard of—after I read the account of Major Western's su—death."

"In what paper did you read it? Can you remember?"

"I remember almost every word of the account, although it was in French. And I have the paper still."

"You have?" she questioned, with a change of tone, and rising a moment to look round in rather a suspicious way. "Then I would like to read it, if you will let me."

"Why, Miss Fortescue?" I asked, really astonished. "Surely such a painful subject had better lie undisturbed, now that time has mercifully buried it."

"If time *had* mercifully buried it," she observed, still with such calm self-possession, yet still with something in her tone that made my pulses throb like a coward's.

"There can be no 'if,'" I said, trying to grasp Miss Fortescue's meaning. "The—death happened ten years ago."

"Mr. Fearn"—she had lifted her face to mine, and was looking searchingly at me as she spoke—"the death, as you forbearingly call it, never happened at all. Major Western is living now, and is coming here to claim his daughter."

For a moment the low trees reeled before my eyes, then I remember hasty words of contradiction falling passionately from my lips, while I felt the muscles tighten in my folded arms, and a pain like an iron hand press my forehead. Yet scarcely a minute could have elapsed before I sat down near Miss Fortescue, and told her, very quietly, but with utter certainty, that it was impossible; and that May had no father—but myself,

The words sounded easy and common-place enough. Who need ever guess the struggle that it cost me to speak of myself so to Ernest Fortescue's sister?

"It would be well indeed for May if that were true," my companion answered, "for her life has been a very happy one, I'm sure, since you have taken her father's place, as you have done indeed, Mr. Fearn. Yet of course we know there can be but about sixteen or seventeen years between you, and so it would be more suitable of her to speak of you as her elder brother."

"Will you tell me," I interrupted—for how could I care to hear her so discuss my child and me?—"why you fancied that Major Western was not dead?"

"I have his own words that he lives. He has written to my brother, from Berlin, and speaks of being here in the course of a month. Don't think that I am unmoved by this unfortunate occurrence, for I have been most troubled. It is two days now since I heard it first."

"Then why——"

"Why did I not let you know at once?" she put in, when I paused. "Because, Mr. Fearn, it is so difficult to find you alone, out of May's sight and hearing, and because it would be such a pity for May to hear of this—yet."

This mention of my child, and my child's possible sorrow, in such a cold and studied voice, quickened my own impatient reply that May need *never* hear of such a falsehood! But, almost before the words were uttered, I had remembered that Miss Fortescue could have no motive for speaking to me so, unless she did it on her brother's behalf. At his request she must have left her guests to speak to me alone, while my child was with him; and he who loved my darling so well could have begged his sister's help only for the purpose of sparing her pain. In real shame for my impatience and suspicion, I apologised to Miss Fortescue for my words. For was it any fault of hers that she could not speak of my child with such love and tenderness as filled my heart, and that she could not do her brother's bidding just as he would have done it?

"I do not wonder that your first feeling was utter incredulity, Mr. Fearn," she said, gently accepting my apology. "It was

mine too, and my brother's. Major Western's letter took us so utterly by surprise that through the whole day we never once believed in its genuineness. Perhaps we both feared too much to allow ourselves to look into it again. At any rate we set aside at first the very possibility of such an unfortunate future for May. But we both knew it would be cowardly to avoid the truth, whatever it might be, until that truth might break upon us all the more crushingly. So—but what need to lengthen what I wish to say to you? I will give you Major Western's letter, and you will consider what is wisest to do. For ourselves, we see but one way to save his daughter pain, and—even degradation."

"Degradation would be impossible for May," I said, heavily-hearted to hear this word coupled with my darling's name, even by one who spoke in kindness.

"From such feelings," she went on, with a brief, compassionate glance into my face, "we all of us would like to spare her. I have learnt to feel for her almost as a sister; you, we all know, have been as a brother to her for many years; and Ernest"—she broke off here with a smile, and shook her head—"I don't know what to say of Ernest, except that he would give his life to keep hers free from such a pain and humiliation as this would be for her; as this must be, unless we ensure her happiness in the only way possible to us."

"And that is——"

I asked the question in a heavy, listless voice which scarcely sounded like my own. If her father really lived, and chose to claim his child, could the strength or depth or passion of our love for her withstand this claim?

"If she were married, Mr. Fearn, her father could not take her from here. She would be safely established in her mother's home."

The words were uttered kindly in their slow distinctness, though to me they sounded icily cruel. Yet had I not for months been preparing myself—ay, and even preparing May too—for this future of hers, marked out to me so clearly now as wise and good? Was I to flinch at the last moment from giving up my child to the life that would be so bright for her, and to the husband whom surely her own mother would have chosen?

"Will you tell me," I asked, merely to gain time before I was brought face to face with that other question, "how Major Western explains what occurred ten years ago?"

"It is a long story," Miss Fortescue answered quickly, as if all this were no more pleasant for her to tell than for me to hear, "and he postpones entering into full particulars until he sees us. He was tempted to practise a fraud to escape his creditors; and

circumstances and chance—as well as his landlady—assisted him. He speaks lightly—indeed I may say flippantly—of the transaction, and seems to think there can be but little blame attached to him, because it was, as he describes it, a desperate emergency. He has been in hiding ever since, abroad, but now he has determined to run all risks and return to England, if only to fetch his daughter. He had heard of her having been brought back here, and I suppose concluded unquestioningly that she has ever since lived in her grandfather's old home. It was not an unnatural fancy, was it? He found out that the house had been occupied by a Mr. Fortescue, and so wrote, as he says, directly to him about May. I can see that he fancies Mr. Fortescue is an old gentleman with a wife and family, among whom May Western has been adopted and brought up as a daughter. My brother and I, Mr. Fearn, think it just as well that this should be his certainty until he comes himself, when, it is to be hoped, his daughter will be beyond his governance. I am sure you will be as anxious as my brother is to make quite sure of this."

I as anxious! The blood seemed boiling in my veins, and my heart ached to take my child from this planning. Sternly I told myself that this was only my own hope for her, and what would be best for her; the reiteration in my own thoughts, while it calmed me, only made that iron grasp upon my forehead all the heavier.

"This is so sudden," I said, as quietly as I could. "I have scarcely yet realized it. When may I see this letter?"

"To-morrow," Miss Fortescue answered, rising now as I had done, but pausing beside me. "My brother hopes you will give him an interview to-morrow, and allow all arrangements to be made for a speedy marriage. Then they will go abroad, and thus May will be spared this misery. You see, Mr. Fearn? When Ernest calls on you to-morrow, he will tell you——"

She was saying this to me in a lowered, earnest voice, standing at my side, when she stopped abruptly, her eyes drawn from my face. Then I, following her glance, saw my child coming towards us along the shrubby path, and in the same moment saw her pause and start, while the soft bright blush I knew so well rose slowly to her very hair. In my own sad consciousness of what we had been saying, I seemed to understand this blush upon my child's wistful, questioning face; but I saw how it astonished my companion, and how she moved from my side with uncharacteristic eagerness, and spoke at once to May. But I could say nothing to my darling.

"I wondered where you were, John," she said, without coming a step nearer to me. "I will go back now."

Before she could have understood Miss Fortescue's prompt answer, the young squire had come among us in his search for May, and a swift smile broke upon her lips as, without a moment's hesitation, she turned to walk back with him. Quite silently Miss Fortescue and I followed them, until, just as we were about to leave the shrubbery and turn into the open lawn, my companion stopped me with a touch upon my arm.

"Mr. Fearne," she said, "I'm afraid I have but awkwardly and imperfectly fulfilled my brother's commission, or pleaded his cause with you. But you yourself made it almost needless for me to do so, as you saw everything so exactly in the light in which we saw it. I may tell Ernest, may I not, that you will see him to-morrow morning, and will help him to shorten the time for any secrecy between us and May."

"Why does he wish to see me?" I asked in unconquerable rebellion, though I knew well that there was but one favour the young squire would sue from me in my simple home.

"Your question proves how clumsy I am at explanation," Miss Fortescue said smiling, but with a rather searching and doubtful glance up into my face. "My brother wishes to see you, Mr. Fearne, that he may win you thoroughly over to his side, in advocating a very early marriage between himself and May Western. You see, do you not, that if her father finds her merely living under your guardianship, as she now is, we can offer not the slightest resistance to his taking her with him where and when he chooses? Of course he now has every right to do so, and it would be very hard for you, after your care of her, to send her to share the life of the professed gambler, in a world that would be worse than death to a pure, shy, truthful girl like May. You are very patient with me, Mr. Fearne, while I say so much that need not be said, and which you understand in your thoughts much more clearly and readily than I do myself. I'm sure that, without a word of mine, you saw at once the danger in which May stands, and the only way of escape that is open to her. If she is married—and especially if she and Ernest have left England—her father's coming, even when she knows of it, will cause her very little sorrow, and certainly no fear and misery. Even when they return she will be safe in her husband's home here."

"Of course," I put in, with a strange, unnatural quietness, "she would be safe in her husband's home—anywhere."

"Anywhere; yes," assented Miss Fortescue, rather hastily. "But, of course, more so here, where Ernest's position is unquestionable and his influence great. Now, Mr. Fearne," she concluded, walking slowly on, "we understand each other

perfectly, do we not? We shall both guard this secret from the poor child herself; for we cannot help sparing one we love so well. Even I, who certainly do not know her as you do, feel most anxious that she shall be saved from such a terrible fate as living with her father; and I shall leave home much more happily this winter if she is established in the position I vacate; in a higher position, I ought to say, as my brother's wife.

I knew Miss Fortescue thus alluded to her own approaching marriage, and, in a vague, bewildered way, I felt grateful to her for doing so. To touch upon any subject that was not my separation from my child was such a relief to me. I think I spoke of it, telling her, in my quiet, clumsy way, that I had been glad to hear of it, and wished her every happiness, and was grateful, I said, to feel that she would not be solitary after her brother had—married. I know now that what I said must have sounded strange to her, for my thoughts were selfishly filled with my own solitariness; but she was very patient with me, and even showed no surprise upon her face, while she offered me her hand, and gave me smiling thanks for—I suppose, for what she knew that I had *meant* to say. Then we sauntered on to join the other guests, among whom I looked in vain for May and Mr. Fortescue.

CHAPTER IX.

DREADING MY LONELINESS.

It was not until the children had been dismissed, and we had assembled in the great entrance-hall, where tea was laid for us, that I began to feel a little uneasy about my child's continued absence. Ever since that minute in which she had joined and left us in the shrubbery, I had felt intensely lonely, even though I had purposely mixed in the crowd much more than I had done before, with a strange, absurd fancy that I might act for her perhaps in her absence. How strange it was, that intense solitariness of mine while all the scene around me was so gay, and noisy, and active! I had talked to the children with ease, and even merriment; I had proposed one of the best games of the evening; I had led the National Anthem, and helped to unite the little groups for their dismissal. I found they all laughed when I spoke to them, as if I jested; and they gave me especial good-byes, so I knew that I was taking May's place, and that presently I should be my own quiet, practical self again, and this dream would have passed. But then—ah, no, it did not do to think of that, for a sadder awaking was to follow; the awaking

to a loneliness of which this night must be a forecast, or to a sadder knowledge for my child than I could ever dare to give her.

I heard Miss Fortescue asking for her brother many times while we loitered round the tables; but I seemed to hear more clearly still—more distinctly even than the questions directly addressed to me, and which I answered with such apparent pleasure—those few words Miss Fortescue had said to me, “I know of course that you have nothing at heart more earnestly than the welfare of your adopted child.” Surely, when I allowed myself to think, it was my own misery I had at heart; so—I must not think.

The lamps were being lighted in the hall, and the trees growing dim and dark against the sky, when some one near me, looking from the window, exclaimed that Mr. Fortescue and Miss Western were coming at last. I was glad to have heard this, for it prepared me to see them come in together, as I knew they would; he with such pride and hope in his young handsome face, she with that soft pink colour in her cheeks. I knew then that he had told her of nothing except his love, and I knew, by the intensity of my own relief, that my great fear in their absence had not been that he should win my child from me, but that he should give her any motive for accepting him beyond her answering love. In all my selfishness I loved her far too well for that.

Almost as surely as if I had heard him speak, I knew what the young squire had asked my child out in the gloaming, and with a smile of ready sympathy, if not of real gladness, I met the lovely eyes she shaded as she came towards me, laughing that the lamplight dazzled her.

I did not hasten her from the Hall. I let them tempt her to stay on and on, later and later, because I knew that when we had said good night she would have only me. Not of course that Ernest Fortescue would ever be likely again to leave her long alone with me. And that would be well, for what a difference it would be for her—I in my humdrum quietness, he in his fervour of love and hope and happiness hanging on every word she said, prizing every smile, able to show her in every tone and glance how much he loved her, willing already that every guest within his house should read his honest love of his as plainly as I read it.

“John, are we ever going home again?”

My darling had come up to me, as I stood, trying to talk and laugh as I had done before her entrance; and she asked the question demurely, guessing nothing of course of how I stayed for her sake, at the squire’s earnest request. Even now he followed her, pleading that it was very early yet; but naturally I took my child’s hint.

"I was just intending to start alone," I answered her. "For hours I have been trying in vain to make you understand that it was time to leave."

"For hours, John," she answered, gravely, "I have been trying in vain to signal you homewards. How fond you are of dissipation and late hours!"

"Let me drive you, Mr. Fearne," urged the young squire, when he found we were quite determined to leave.

"If May wishes it," I said. "If May is tired." And I tried to speak as if it did not signify to me in the slightest.

"I would rather walk," May answered gently. "There is moonlight for us. Please let us walk."

I think she knew that this was what I should like best—though I had tried to prevent her thinking so—for she smiled, in that grave, quiet way of hers, which always seemed to tell me that she understood me. Indeed what wonder that my darling, with that clear gaze of hers, should see through all my clumsy subterfuges?

Then we said good night to our host and hostess, and to the lingering guests, and May slipped her hand within my arm—as even yet it was so natural for her to do—and we started together out in the peaceful beauty of the night. And the October moon was at its full.

I had a strange, sad longing to be left in silence through that walk, a feeling most unusual with me when my child and I were together. I longed to-night only to feel her beside me, her hands locked round my arm in the old childish way, and her pure, grave face so near me in the silence.

I knew what she had to tell me presently, and I was covetous of this sweet restful silence, while I prepared myself for what this walk—ay, and all other walks—would be to me when I might never again feel her clinging touch, or even have her silent presence near me.

I tried—ah, how I tried!—to fancy what going home would mean to me when I was once more utterly alone, as I had been before Heaven sent my pet to me. Then I tried to feel grateful because she would live near me, and would be happy. But even in this sweet, calm hour, my selfishness held stronger sway, and in my jealousy and my rebellion I grudged my darling to the man who loved her with such a different love from mine, and whose love would have such a different fulfilment. What right had he to feel it such a *natural* thing that he should win her from me? What right had he to ask the gift from me, as if my life were worth no thought of others? It would be less cruel to stab me to the heart to-night than to come presently to take my

treasure from me, after these dear, happy years through which she had grown so closely into my heart that to tear her from it would be worse than death.

Such bitter, selfish thoughts these were to hold on such a sweet and peaceful night; then I paused a moment in my walk while I shook them from me, with a longing, strong as prayer, that I should prove Miss Fortescue's words true, and have indeed "nothing more earnestly at heart than the welfare of my adopted child."

"John," May questioned, but with no glance of surprise at that momentary pause of mine, "you are not vexed at my not talking, are you? The silence of the night is so very, very beautiful.

All the covetous anger died from my face when her eyes were lifted slowly to read my answer. All the bitter selfishness melted from my heart as her clasp tightened on my arm. All the old bad feelings died to my darling's gentle words.

So, in silence still, but for me a different silence now, we walked on, until at last we reached that gate of the hill orchard where we always give a last long look at the Hall. And, while we stood there, I broke this long sweet silence, just softly touching the linked fingers on my arm, and speaking words that were far harder to utter than she could ever guess, but words that I hoped would help her, knowing what she had to tell me.

CHAPTER X.

OVER THE FALLEN LEAVES.

"AND often, May, when you are living in your mother's beautiful old home, I shall stand just here, and picture to myself the life within."

The old Hall lay like a picture in the moonlight, and after my long gaze I looked down from it into my darling's thoughtful face. Her eyes had not come back to mine, nor did she answer me. But I—on this spot where her mother had rescued me from selfishness and discontent so many years before—could bury the thoughts which had been fighting me so hard that night, and could remember how I ought to have nothing more earnestly at heart than the welfare of Miss Mary's child.

"Yes, dear. Often and often I shall stand here and picture you within those old grey walls; and it will all seem so real to me, my pet, that I—I shall be almost as well off as if I were there too."

"While you will take care to stay very far away yourself, John."

May said it lightly—I think because she heard my voice faltering a little, and so wished to break the pause—but I was brave to go on now, thinking only—so much easier it was upon this spot than it could have been anywhere else!—of what my darling's future ought to be; I mean the future of Miss Mary's child.

"Dear," I said, "no one has such a right to reign in the beautiful old house as you have. But don't let the grass grow upon this little field-path. I would like it trodden, then, dear, as we tread it now. I had it made for your mother, May, and—Don't look sad to-night, my darling"—for the old sorrow was upon her face at my mention of her mother—"I—I feel sure, dear, that not only your feet coming, but my feet going, will keep it worn and neat, as we have done lately; you and I together."

There was a long pause—to me it seemed a long, long pause—and then my child questioned me gently, looking still before her, with something glistening on her lashes.

"Did you guess, John, or did Mr. Fortescue tell you?"

"Neither exactly, dear," I answered, as lightly as I could. "Mr. Fortescue made it too plain for me to guess; but he has not told me—yet."

I had helped her in the telling; but I could say no more just yet. So again there was a silence between us, while we still stood against the orchard-gate, looking back upon the quiet, moonlit Hall and park, until at last May broke the silence, just as if she only finished aloud the thought my words had given her.

"Yes, John, he asked me——"

"I know, my pet."

"You seem to know everything."

The tone was even a little unsteady in its impatience, and I saw that she would rather speak frankly to me than that I should anticipate all she had to tell. So I waited for her next words, though they were very long in coming.

"You wish me to—go and live there, John?" she asked, with her wistful eyes upon the moonlit Hall.

But, looking down upon her so, the answer that I wished to give her would not come.

"You wish me to go soon, John? Very soon, you seem to say."

Still I could give no answer in this brief fit of cowardice, and so she raised her eyes and questioned me differently.

"Why do you hurry me, John? Why do you want me to go so soon?"

"I want you to be happy, dearest. That is all."

"And you think I shall be happier there?"

My cowardly hesitation was all gone now, and once more I had simply "the welfare of my child at heart."

"If I did not think so, I could not let you go, my pet,"

"You call it my home. You say I shall be happier there," May said, with a new, quiet earnestness in her tone, and a grave, direct glance into my eyes; "then why did you not call it my home when I was a child, and homeless? Why did you not say I should be happier there when you first tried to make me happy years ago?"

"All is so different now," I answered, every word a pain to me in its utterance, as my thoughts went back to that dear time, and I knew that I had had the power to make her happy in her childhood—even I.

"Different? How?"

"What childish questioning, May!" I said, smiling a little, knowing that I could not answer her steadily in any other way.

"You gave me the life you thought best for me then, John. Why has it ceased to be the life you think best for me now?"

"My child," I answered, just a little brokenly—for what question in the world could she have asked me that would have been harder to answer?—"the home I gave you then was but for a little time. The one offered you now is for life."

"How do you know?" May inquired, with a flash of sudden petulance which was most unlike her. "My mother's old home does not belong to Ernest Fortescue. He may give it up any day. You have no more reason to suppose that that would be my home for life than you had——"

The quick, impetuous word were broken as suddenly as they were begun; and who can ever guess how grateful I was that that impatient, childish question had been left unfinished?

There was a little silence between us, which I could not break, then May spoke even more gently than usual, and with a dreamy slowness.

"Yes, John, you were right. Ernest Fortescue wants me to go and live in the home my mother loved. She did love it—oh, how tenderly!"

"I know it, May."

"Yes," my child went on, in her quiet, dreamy way, "you know it. Have you not often told me of it? And so lovingly she used to remember it, John, that she made me—even before I had seen it—love it too. Was it strange?"

"Strange, my darling? It was most natural." And then, in my old-fashioned, fatherly way, I put my arm about her, as we stood there in the peaceful moonlight.

"Was it strange," she went on, unheeding both my answer and my caress, "that in those dreary Paris rooms of ours, the memory of such a home as hers had been, and of the life she led there, should be passing sweet to—my mother, and that I should love it too—for her sake?"

"To whatever life she might have gone, May," I said, looking down into the tender, moonlit face I loved, and longing for power to brighten these sad, childish memories, "all remembrance of the life she had lived here must have been passing sweet, my pet, because her life was one of usefulness and helpfulness and sympathy—for all."

"I could never live, even there," May said, "such a life as hers. How can I dare to take her place, and be so different?"

"Leave us—leave the young squire to judge of that, my love," I said, and the words came now unbrokenly, even almost coldly, in the great strain I put upon myself.

"Yes; it was very dear to my mother," May went on, still in that dreamy, wondering way, and still with her wistful gaze upon the beautiful home where she was wanted.

"It will be dearer still to you, my child."

"And you can spare me, John?"

The thoughtful, quiet question came unexpectedly, even though I had for so long been reading how her pity for myself had saddened even her own new dreams to-night; yet I had tried hard, too, to hide any dreary glimpse of my own selfish pain. What a return for all she had been to me, that now, in her first awakening to happy love, it should be *my* gloomy, solitary figure which darkened the sunny picture!

"The young squire knew that I could spare you, May. Was it not plain that he was sure of that, dear, before he won your answer?"

"My answer!" she echoed, swiftly, with an entire change of tone, and even of expression; as her eyes came back from their far, rapt gaze, and flashed one frightened glance into mine. "He did not make me answer him in such haste. All men are not so impatient as you are. I—I would have answered him, if he had wished it, of course. Why not? It is but natural, as you say, that I should be very glad to take my mother's place. It—it was but a silly whim of mine to wish to speak to—you first."

"Then tell me, May," I said, quite coolly to all seeming; for I saw how, in her compassion, she had wished to break this to me as gently as possible, and I could not bear her bravery to be so much greater than my own; "when Mr. Fortescue is to come for his answer."

"To-morrow, John."

To-morrow! Only one night to pass, one sleepless night, and

I should know, beyond all doubt, how soon my darling was to leave me.

"To-morrow, dear?" I repeated, almost cheerily, for she was not looking up into my troubled face. "That is well. But even to-night, I fancy, he knows pretty well what your answer is to be."

"You do, of course, John. You always know what is—best for me."

"And you can trust me, dear?"

"I ought to do so, John, remembering how you made my happiness all the time I was a child."

All the time she was a child! Yes, it was the simple truth as she had said it. I had made her happy while she was a child. Now that she was a woman, this was beyond my reach. Often as I had framed this very thought to myself, the few words from her own lips had a new pain for me to-night.

"Yes, dear, the old farm life was enough for you all the while you were a child, but now you are ready to take your place among the ladies of the county, as your mother did! How glad the thought would have made her. I like to fancy it."

"Do you?" my child asked me, in a cold, sad way (so impossible was it to her to hear, even yet, as an ordinary speech, any one which touched her mother's name). "Do you really like to fancy it?"

And once more—but for the last time—I was a coward in my heart, and turned my face away, and could not answer. Then in the silence there swept over me all I had heard that day; of the sorrow and humiliation that threatened my child; of the cloud that—if we did not stay it—would come between her and the sunlight for evermore; of the cruel and degrading story which might be told her soon, to poison the purity and freshness of her nature; of the life of fraud and sin which soon must overshadow her, and leave its taint upon her, unless I, who loved her, gave her up without hesitation and delay to the man she loved. And so well I loved that, after those few moments of silence, I was strong to do it.

"May darling, do you trust me that what my heart is set upon is for your—welfare?"

"Yes, John," she answered, simply, but so earnestly.

"Then, dear one, it seems best to me, as well as to Ernest Fortescue, that you should go and live in your mother's old home."

"You wish me to go?"

"Yes."

I did not try to make that answer longer. I only tried to say it as steadily and clearly as I could.

"Then I will go."

"What, May? What, my dearest?"

I could not help that eager questioning. It was not because I had not heard her answer—though it had been spoken so low, and with her head turned from me—it was only because, even now at the last, I fought feebly against the certainty that my house was to be left to me so desolate.

Slowly she raised her head and met my eyes. Some look in them—perhaps a shade of their old loneliness stealing back—filled hers with pity; and for that moment our gaze was steadfast and sad, mine with a yearning tenderness, hers with a yearning compassion.

"You wish it," she said then, very quietly; "and so, as he asks me, I will go. He need not have waited for to-morrow. It is all smooth for him and for me. I make the promise now, and here. I will go."

I read the great truthfulness within her eyes, and even in that moment of my own despair I drew her closely to my side and thanked her. I knew then how faithfully my child would keep this promise, just as I know now how faithfully she kept it.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DAY'S TURMOIL.

THOUGH so many years have passed me since that night, I still remember most vividly how its miserable hours crept by, and how eagerly I watched for the first sign of dawn, that I might escape from the house, and perhaps from a little of the burden of my pain.

Yet would the coming day be easier to bear than this restless, feverish night? Had I not to pass through every hour of that new day which would seem endless to me, and would leave my child and me on the eve of parting? Would not all its hours drag as these long night-hours had done; yet would I not hold them if I could, because, after they had passed, I should know so surely the old solitude? True, my child would be with me still for a little time, but would she not be listening ever for a coming footstep, and looking out upon another home?

At last the dawn broke faint and chill above the eastern hills, and I rose and left the house, in the wild, vain hope of wearing out my misery by bodily fatigue. But my thoughts would not travel with me, and clung resistlessly about that one selfish consciousness which had made the night so long.

The day had come indeed which was to part me from my child. To-day her lover would come, and listen while she promised him to leave me at his bidding. To-day she would tell me, just with her old caress—ay, even with tears perhaps, in pity for the grim and solitary life to which she left me—that she had kept her promise, and would very soon be Ernest Fortescue's wife.

And it was all well—so I said to myself, rapidly and determinately, as I walked on and on. Perhaps, in her kindness and pity for me, she would have stayed a little longer in the old farm remembering it had been her home when there had been no other open, but could I accept what in her unmeasured, childlike gratitude she would, I know, have given so willingly? Could I let her run even the faintest risk of her life being sacrificed, in my own greedy longing for her sweet, bright presence in my home? Could I—even though she would say no word in dissent—keep her one day longer than I need do, from the man whose love would give her all that I would have forfeited my life to lay at her feet? Ah me, had I not forfeited now what was dearer than my life?

I must have walked as rapidly as my thoughts were travelling; for when, on my return to the farm, May met me at the gate, she started, I remember, when she looked into my face.

"I have been for a stroll to the woods, dear," I said, with a smile for her, as I answered one of her childish questions that always came so naturally from her—where had I been?

"To the woods?" she echoed, slipping her hand into mine, as we walked up the garden. "You are always very fond of the shadows, John. And"—her eyes of course were full of happiness this morning, and looked up laughingly into mine—"what a long stroll you must have had since four o'clock!"

She had heard me leave the house, then, cautious and quiet as I had been.

"All good little girls should have been sleeping then," I said, remembering how I had fancied her sleeping calmly, wrapt in her new happiness.

"I am not a good little girl, John, I would rather have been with you."

But I was grateful that she had not been with me through those four heavy hours, even though the hours that she could spend with me were numbered now.

I remember that we breakfasted together that morning almost as cheerfully as we had ever done—so well had my solitary walk prepared me for this hour. Even when I had risen to go, I lingered still, while May, as usual, hovered near me; and, when my saddled horse was brought to the door, she came out with me

her hands clasped round my arm as I loved to feel them, and just as she had seen me off every morning for ten happy years. But I sent the horse away. I must walk to-day, or thought would be unbearable. I turned at the last moment and spoke to May, as easily as I could, words to which I had been schooling myself all the morning.

"I suppose the young squire will be down here quite early, May?"

"I suppose so."

Her answer was just as tranquil as my question, and her head was turned a little from me.

"But there is no fear that he will not wait for my return, dear?"

"I suppose not."

"So I need not hasten back. He will only thank me for keeping him waiting."

I said this with a feeble intention of bringing a smile to my child's pale face; but I did not wonder that I failed, for it was but a heavy speech after all, and uttered heavily. Could any words hide from her that dreary consciousness of mine that, after to-day, they two would be all in all to each other, and I one alone?

"John," May said, dropping now, in a quick, careless way, this subject, which indeed we had settled between us last night at the orchard gate, "those ceaseless games of yesterday have tired me completely; so I shall rest at home all to-day. Now good-bye."

I knew she stood watching me as I walked slowly from the house, but I could not turn to smile on her again. Things that had for so long been easy and natural to me were growing impossible, in this, restless, envious pain, against which I fought so hard and vainly.

In my rapid walk around the farm I had come into the yard. Here the men were at work on the threshing-machine, and I joined them eagerly. Perhaps, if my hands were busy, my head might be eased of this continuous throbbing pain. Swift walking had not killed it, but hard manual labour might possibly give me temporary forgetfulness of the keen, mental pain.

The horses were marching steadily in their circle, for we had no threshing by steam in those days, and I took his task first from one man, then from another, following it always with double the haste and energy he had thought sufficient. I laughed a little when I heard the men whispering how fearless the master was in managing the great engine, wondering what they would have said could they have known how far from fearless I really was that morning.

All my strength and energy I spent upon this constant labour, trying whether thought might not be at last exhausted by sheer

physical weariness. I must have been about three hours in the yard, and was still courting the labour, which must in reality already have wearied me, when I caught sight of Mr. Fortescue riding quickly up the lawn to the house. I turned my eyes away again in a moment, but then suddenly I ordered the man who was feeding the machine to hasten to the house and hold the squire's horse, while I took his place myself. I do not know why I did this, for Ernest Fortescue would always most willingly and pleasantly stable his own horse when he did not see one of the men about. I suppose that it was only a spontaneous outcome of this great restlessness of mine, which sought for any physical vent.

As I worked on, feeding the hungry monster, I counted the handfuls that I gave it, just simply that I might not morbidly follow in my thoughts that interview between my child and her lover. But the effort was of no use. The scene acted itself ceaselessly in my brain. Now once more, and for the last time, the young man had asked that question which he had every right to ask. Now his happiness must be complete, for May had answered him, without a further fear of grieving me. And now my child was a promised wife; for she had not told him, with that soft, bright blush upon her face——

Wildly and ceaselessly the very words of her promise formed themselves in my brain, and all the time, in my effort to drown them, I worked on without a pause. But at last the corn was all threshed, and I called to the driver to check the horses. As he did so, I gathered up the few remaining heads of wheat, and absently, with my left hand, dropped them into the machine. Just at that instant, far behind me, I heard my child's voice calling for me. I turned quickly to answer her—very quickly, for she should have my readiest and most loving sympathy in her joy to-day—and, as I knew she would not be likely to look for me here, I called my answer, very loudly as well as cheerily. In answer, as it were, to the sound of my raised voice, the horses made a spring forward to fall into their old routine of labour, and the powerful drum spun round and caught and crushed my arm.

I understood all this as it happened, scarcely more than momentary as it was, and I remember a strange, swift sensation, as if I saw the old farm empty, and heard my darling's sobs. Then there fell the darkness of death upon my life.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER THE DAY'S TURMOIL.

THERE was the warm and pleasant glow of firelight on the walls and curtains, and the pure sweet scent of winter violets in my low, old-fashioned dressing-room. There was a peaceful stillness all around me, as I lay propped upon my pillows. For, though May's low chair stood empty beside my wide old couch—as I knew that it must stand through all the coming years—she had not yet left me for always. She had only a few minutes ago been summoned from my side, and presently she would return.

I was coming slowly back to life after a long, fierce struggle; but I think, in my helplessness, I had gathered a better strength than that which I had lost. Not once all through my long illness, nor even through this slow convalescence, had May ever spoken of our parting, and I had waited, not in cowardice, but until I could be quite sure that the envy and discontent of my thoughts were gone. Now at last I knew I could speak steadily of her own happiness, and pray Heaven to bless her in her new life, as her grateful, faithful guardian should.

I would wait no longer, for many, many days had passed since that October morning when she had run to seek me, that my congratulations might be the first she should receive, and I had never been able to give them even yet!

I lay watching for her return, shrinking no longer from the future; only recalling what my child had been to me through all these weeks of suffering. Never once could I remember having wished for her in vain; having watched for her without her coming; having listened for her voice without its bright, sweet greeting falling on my ear; or having looked in her dear eyes without their great tenderness and bravery soothing me, however worn and fretful I might have been.

Of course I knew to whom she had been summoned now, and I was glad for her to be tempted from her weary confinement with the sick man, beside whom she had kept so faithful a watch; and to be cheered and rested by the one who had sole right to soothe and cheer her now. How well it was that my child had another guardian, for mine must be a useless life now for many months to come.

"Here I am, John."

May was in her own low seat beside me once again, and she took my one uninjured hand between both of hers as she spoke.

"You haven't looked at the papers, John, or opened your book. Next time I go away I shall tell Mrs. Scott"—Mrs. Scott was my housekeeper, and had been with me even before my child came to me—"that she must sit with you, even if you do try to send her away. She always was more obedient to me than to you. Why are you always, always thinking, when I am not here?"

"Perhaps because it is so impossible to think while you are here. But I have finished now, dear," I went on; and, while I looked into her sweet, compassionate eyes, just on a level with my own, I could even smile a little. "So let us talk. May, you remember the day when—this happened?"

Her eyes followed mine, down to my disabled hand, and then for all answer she laid her cheek upon it for one instant.

"May, it was the day that Mr. Fortescue came here for your answer to that question which we had settled at the orchard-gate the night before. You see how well I remember it all now, dear?"

"Yes, John. May I read to you a little?"

"And of course I know, my darling, what your answer was, and how glad he was to hear it. I watched him come that morning. I remember how quickly he rode."

"Don't try your memory yet, John," May put in, most wistfully. "Let me read."

"And then I heard your voice calling me, May; so cheerily. Sometimes the tone has come back to me since. I was so glad to feel that you sought me first in your happiness. You see how well I remember it all?"

"Yes. Now I'm going to read to you the funniest thing you ever heard."

But I could not let her put me off any longer. I felt strong to-day, and was so doubtful of myself for the future.

"You gave him your answer on that morning, May?"

"Yes."

The word was very low and quiet, and my child shyly bent to hide the blush that rose so slowly and so prettily into her lifted face. But I could not let her sorrow for me, or her sweet sympathy, come between us in her happiness.

"I know what it was. I remember so well what you said in the moonlight, as we came home, that I know, of course, what your answer was, May."

"Yes, you know."

"You told me," I persisted—for I knew it would all feel a little brighter to my child when she was convinced how perfectly I understood that I was soon to be alone—"how you were going to live in the home your mother loved."

"Yes, I told you."

"And after you had told me, May"—she had raised her head again now, but her eyes had not yet come back to mine—"you told the squire. You promised to be his wife."

The words came with no evidence of the struggle they had cost; and I knew this beyond a doubt when May looked straight into my eyes with her frank, clear gaze.

"Yes, John. When he came that morning I promised to be his wife. Had I not said I would?"

"Ah, my child, my pet, you will be very happy in your mother's home! It will be the best and brightest life for you. But—dear, you will try to love the *memory* of these sweet, childish days, for—for your old guardian's sake?"

"I can do nothing for my old guardian's sake," May said, in her quaint, gentle way, "until he is old. How anxious you are to make your guardianship a thing of the past!"

"It was needed only for a little while, you see, dear."

"And how anxious you are, John, to prove to me that I never was meant to be more than a bird of passage in this dear old home."

"It has been dear to you?" I questioned, eagerly and almost jealously. "It has been really dear to you, May, in—the old times?"

"Nothing could have made it dearer," she said, her eyes shining wistfully through gathering tears.

Then there was a little silence, while I felt what a good thought this would be for me, whether I recovered and lived through the long years without my dear companion, or whether—as I knew they thought it possible—my life should stretch only through a few months of the future. What a good thought!

Presently May broke the silence, almost more quietly than she had spoken yet.

"John, Mr. Fortescue is here, and would like to see you. May he come in?"

This was what I had been expecting, and I was quite prepared now to hear his happy story from his own lips. I nodded to May, as if Ernest Fortescue's coming in to speak to me were a most natural and trifling matter. Then she rose, and went away to fetch him, while I waited, preparing myself for the joy there would be upon his face when he and May should come in to me together.

Yet, when he came, May was not with him. Even in this, she was trying how she could make it easier for me.

CHAPTER XIII.

FAREWELL.

FOR many minutes the young squire stood talking to me, kindly and sympathetically, of my long illness; then he sat down opposite me, and spoke of little things that had occurred in the village since my absence; then of general matters; until stooping a little as he sat, and with his eyes upon the fire, he paused, as if quite suddenly all subjects of conversation had failed him. I had seen how, in his compassion for me, he had avoided any mention of his own prospects, even of May's name; but I could not let that go on. He must know that, even in my weakness I did not shrink from witnessing his happiness. He must know how fully satisfied I was about my child's future with him. So I began to tell him this; but when I detected the struggle in my own tones, and remembered how ill I must be looking, I was but little surprised that he himself should look so pained, and try to silence me.

"My sister's marriage is to take place next week, and in London," he said, never seeming to think the words irrelevant; "and we go to town to-morrow, Mr. Fearne. I was very anxious to see you before I left, to be quite sure you were really recovering."

I remember being a little puzzled by his manner; but I was far more troubled by the thought of his going away just now, and leaving May to the confinement from which he alone could successfully rescue her.

"Shall you be many days away?" I asked him, presently, while he still sat stooping forward; his eyes lowered now from the fire to the carpet at his feet.

"I shall not return," he answered, most quietly, "I have given up my tenure of the Hall."

I felt my heart beat so hurriedly and irregularly that I could not breathe even the one question which seemed echoing helplessly in my brain, and mocking me in the warm, still silence. I could only lie in my great weakness and wait for what he would tell me; wait a long, long time, as it seemed to me, while his moody eyes were still upon the floor.

I think it was the noisy dropping of a cinder, breaking that unnatural silence of the room, that made him speak to me at last, rousing himself suddenly from his long reverie.

"After my sister's marriage, I intend to leave England, and I may be away for a year—or more."

"But you will surely return here?"

"No; I have no intention of doing so?"

The questions, as well as their answers, had been brief, and even cold; but I think that with him, as with me, their coldness hid a wonderful restlessness.

"I thought you were fond of the Hall and—and the neighbourhood, Mr. Fortescue?" I said, presently, with a great effort.

"I was," he answered, rising now, and slowly pacing my room. "I have been. But that is over, and if I stayed here now I should soon grow to hate the place."

"But—when May——"

I could get no farther in my question, but it was not my own cowardice that stopped me this time; it was Ernest Fortescue's hasty signal to me.

"Need we speak of her?" he asked, with a catching in his voice.

Then for the first time in my life a strange feeling came over me of being apart from my child and from her lover; far apart from them in a quietness which could not touch them. For the first time my feeling for Ernest Fortescue was one of anxious sympathy, and I forgot how high he stood above me, possessing every gift of attraction which all my life long I had lacked. And now, without any pondering of the question, I knew it would be better for him that we should speak of her, though he had begged me not, and that, if I could help him at all, it could be only after hearing the truth from him. So—a little falteringly, I fear—I told him, that, as we came home from the Hall on the night before my accident, May and I had spoken together of his offer to my child, and that she had told me she would be his wife; and we had spoken of what a happy life she would lead in the home that used to be her mother's.

I watched his face as I spoke, expecting to see it change and brighten; but its utter despondency was unbroken, even when, after a few seconds' pause, he answered me.

"She did accept my love—next day. You would not remember, Mr. Fearn, how next morning I came down here for her answer——"

"Yes, I remember," I put in, quite steadily. "Do not fear to speak to me of that day—now. My pain has almost left me. On that morning you came for my child's answer to the question you had asked her the night before. I knew quite well what her answer was to be."

"Yes, her answer then was a very happy one for me," the young man said, with quiet earnestness. "But then came the grief for us all in your accident."

"And in her affection and her pity for me," I put in when he paused, still trying to speak steadily of that day, "she set aside her own pleasure, and even yours, Mr. Fortescue, that, in my suffering, she might minister to mine. Heaven bless her! Can you not see, as I do, how unselfish and compassionate she has been?"

"I thought it was so at first," the young squire answered heavily, "and so I waited and hoped. But she would not let me hope. She said she feared I was waiting, and she would not let me wait. She would speak very truthfully, she said, and would I please to understand and forgive her? Whatever injury she had done me, I must have forgiven her when she so wistfully asked me, with her eyes so full of sorrow for—us all, I think."

"Yes, for us all," I said, seizing eagerly upon his words, "but most for me. She is so good to me, so true to me, she would not let herself be happy while I lay near death."

"It was not that," young Fortescue said, standing beside my couch. "If it had been a question of waiting, I could have waited cheerfully. But it was quite different. She had utterly changed to me even in one day, and she gave me no hope at all."

How could he be so blind? I asked myself, until I remembered how impossible it was he could know her as I did—I who from her childhood had been accustomed to see her give up any pleasure for herself, if by doing so she could give the slightest pleasure to me. How plainly I read it all now! She would have no happiness for herself while I lay maimed and suffering.

She would not consent to leave me when mine possibly might be a helpless, solitary future which she, by her devotion and self-sacrifice, could cheer and soothe. This had been her brave and pitiful decision, and I alone must rescue her from it. While my heart beat even painfully at the thought of her compassion for me, I was firmly determined that I would no longer allow myself to stand in the way of her happiness; no longer let the shadow of my helplessness and solitude mar her sunny prospects.

"Mr. Fortescue," I asked, and I myself could easily detect a new tone in my voice in spite of its earnestness, "will you tell me whether May has heard anything of that letter you received from her father, or of any motive for our hastening her—marriage?"

"No," he answered, readily. "Of course I have told her nothing. How could I hurt her so?"

"And have you heard from Major Western again?"

"More than once. He speaks of being over here very soon."

What would I not give, even now, if I could keep this knowledge from May!"

Ah, what would not I have given too! Yet on me must devolve the task of telling her, and telling her now, while she was giving up so much for my sake.

"Perhaps it is not wise to keep it from her," I said, bowing my head in my hands in utter weariness. "I will tell her. And thus I will release her from her devotion to me. When may I see you again, Mr. Fortescue?"

"I meant this to be my last visit," he said; but his face was less troubled now. "I felt that I could not venture here again. You can scarcely guess how hard it was to-day."

"Yes, I can guess," I answered, quietly.

It was at that very moment that the door was opened, and May came softly in to us, looking wonderfully pale and gentle in the firelight. I saw in a moment that she had come fancying I was alone again, and that she was sorry now, and would fain have gone back if she could have done so without question. But it was too late. While the old gladness that I always felt to see her, swallowed even the great dread of grieving her, I held out my hand and waited for hers.

CHAPTER XIV.

MY LAST EFFORT.

INSTEAD of sitting down beside me, as she had done all through my illness—it seeming such a natural spot for her—she went up to the hearth, and stood looking down into the fire, as if she were not come to stay at all. As she did so, Ernest Fortescue went up and stood opposite her; and for a few moments I watched them standing there in the firelight. Was it not in my power to-day to bring them together as they had been before my accident?

"May," I said, when I felt quite sure that I could break my silence steadily, "will you listen to a few words I want to say to you before Mr. Fortescue leaves? Is there not some mistake, dear, in his coming to bid me good-bye?"

"I knew he was going away," she answered, rather sadly, and without looking up. "He told me."

For a moment then I wildly wished that I had let him go before I spoke to her. I wished that she and I could have been alone together before I need tell her what I had decided it was right for her to hear. But presently again I knew that it

was better as it was. The young lover's presence gave me strength to speak as my child's guardian only; a thoughtful guardian who had her welfare at his heart.

"Dear," I said, looking earnestly into her face, though it was not turned towards me, "I do not ask you why he goes. I know, too well, how constantly you have waited on me through my illness, and how willingly you would give up your own pleasure for that of others. I only want to tell you that there is a reason for your giving up all this sacrifice for me, and letting Ernest Fortescue claim the wife who, not very long ago, promised herself to him."

She had turned her head now, and was looking into my face, gravely and anxiously; but I do not think she could see upon it then the trouble which she had lately seen so very often.

"I have told Ernest the truth," she said simply. "He understands."

"I will not force you to repeat anything you have said to me, May," he put in gently. "But perhaps it is well for you to hear from Mr. Fearn what I have have feared to tell you."

"If you know what it is," May said to him, almost appealingly, "will you not tell me, please, Ernest? I will listen quite patiently to you, if I need really listen to this at all. John is so weak and tired. Surely he may rest?"

"May," I went on, turning my eyes from her wistful face that I might speak more calmly, "suppose that a misfortune threatened—Ernest say, from which only his speedy marriage with you could successfully free him. Suppose only two courses lay before him—one to wed the girl he loves—and has loved even for years—to take her to lovely countries she had often longed to see, and then to bring her back to the happiest home in the world, and—and—as the story-books say—live happy ever after; the other—are you listening, dear? I cannot see your face."

"Yes, John."

"The other to give up this happy married life, for the sake of a fancied duty elsewhere—only a fancied duty, May—with his own hand to destroy the happy future, not only of himself, but of one he loves, and to bring upon himself—if you could but understand me, dear!—an infamous career from which all his nature would revolt. Ought he to hesitate with such a choice before him, May?"

"I do not understand," she said, questioning not me, but Mr. Fortescue, her face very pale and grave. "Does such a future threaten you, Ernest? Have you such a choice to make?"

"That is the choice," he answered, with a rather nervous

glance at me. "Your decision will determine which of these futures is to be—ours."

"But a man has such power over his own life," she said, almost whispering it in her great thoughtfulness. "He need not—he need not live an—*an infamous career*—you called it so."

No wonder that, in that pitiful searching glance of hers, she should read some glimmering of the truth, when the crimson rushed so hotly to the very roots of his hair. First her gaze grew a little bewildered, then she suddenly turned away from him, and came and knelt beside my couch, looking straight into my eyes.

"What do you mean, John? What is the disgrace that threatens—me? It cannot be you. It cannot be Ernest. It is *my name* that—that is not unblemished like yours—and his. Tell me the truth."

"May, my child, why should you suspect——"

"It is not suspicion; it is certainty," she said, in a strange steady way. "Not that my life will ever be discreditable to you but that you fear something for me, from which you would guard me, in your great kindness and affection. You have never yet denied me anything I asked, John; oh, don't deny me now! I can bear anything you tell me. Why should you doubt me so? Why," she said, tears starting at last into her pleading eyes, "should you treat me as if I were a child?"

And so without another single doubt as to what had been right or what wrong, only with the old consciousness that her choice was always best, her decisions always wisest, I told her the simple truth, covering my eyes while I spoke, not because it was so hard to meet her steadfast, wistful gaze, but because I dared not see it fall at last in her humiliation.

I told her slowly, but in few words; and then I waited, fearing to hear, though I could not see, the sorrow of my child. But I need not have feared. She heard my story to the very end, and then she rose and, leaving my side, leaned upon the end of my couch, where I could not see her face.

"Mr. Fortescue," she said, just in her own gentle, natural tones, "have you those letters which are—*forged* in my father's name?"

"I wish it were so," replied the young squire, eagerly seizing her idea, while he overlooked her question. "We hoped so most earnestly, but—but he has proved himself really—the writer, I mean—Major Western."

"Impossible," May answered, with quiet, proud conviction in her pausing tone. "My father died when—when my mother and I were—together. And Madame—I never heard her other name,

but we lodged in her house—took me, while my mother slept, to the house, and I saw him. I did not know what I was going to see. I could not have gone if I had. She took me, unknowing whither I went. But I saw—my father—*dead*. My mother cried bitterly when she found where I had been. But I could not cry. It was too terrible. Who can he be who pretends now to be my father ? ”

“ I will show you the letters,” the young squire said ; but I could see that it was difficult to him to believe what had become certainty in my mind while May spoke. “ If this be a fraud, I will spare no pains to sift and expose it.”

“ No, please,” my child said, gently. “ You have been annoyed too much already by what ought never to have been allowed to vex anyone but myself. I know what a trouble I have been for many years to my own guardian ; but no one indeed had any right to make me the cause of worry and anxiety to you, Mr. Fortescue.”

He interrupted her eagerly ; but I fancied she hardly heard what he said, while she stood waiting, so pale and still, and with such a tale of patient sadness in her clasped white hands.

“ Thank you,” she said, when he had finished. “ It is very good of you to say these things, because I know you would not say them unless you really felt them, and it shows how kind you have always been to me. But—please forgive me for speaking just what I feel to-night—I have had no time to be prepared for—for what I have just heard ; please let me do what is—what is surely my duty alone. May I have those letters soon, and I will write to the—the writer of them ? ”

“ Who can he be ? ” put in young Fortescue, for the first time moving from his position on the rug, as if he felt that May had in some way made him understand that she had said all she had strength to say.

“ In those long-ago days,” she said, a little brokenly, “ my father had—a servant who was not like a servant—at least, he got a certain power over my father, and led him——”

“ Hush, May ! ” I cried, rising instantly in my great weakness, broken-hearted to hear my child speak so to us, who had no right to hear this from her brave young lips. “ Hush, my child ! Forget that time. Remember only how we wish to spare you now—we who love you.”

For a moment she looked into my face with a terrified glance, fearing only for me ; then her head fell upon my arm, as sometimes it had done in those old days when, as a little child, she had grown sad in talking to me of her mother ; and the tears were as quietly shed to-night as they had been in that strange,

grave sadness of her childhood; as naturally shed—there beside me, as I felt most gratefully—as if she put me willingly into the place of the mother whose loss had come back to her to-night with a new sorrow.

I do not know whether we spoke to each other through those few moments, before May raised her head again, and quietly offered her hand to Ernest Fortescue.

"It was a kind thought," she said, steadying her voice by a great effort, "of yours and of my guardian's to wish to place me beyond the reach of—of even my father's authority, and I shall always remember how nobly you wished me not to know of any threatened humiliation. But it is over now, and—if I may—I will write the truth to that man, and—and ask my guardian to forget it all, and—let me still be his adopted child, and—and not so much trouble as I have been before."

Ah, was it any wonder that the thought of this happiness to me just then, in my feebleness, unstrung and exhausted as I was, should unman me, even as the fear of my child's loss had never done? For a moment the room seemed to reel before me. I felt my child's hands seize mine, heard her swift, low cry, and then it was all darkness.

CHAPTER XV.

MAY'S HOME.

ERNEST FORTESCUE had been to bid us farewell again, as he left for town that day. May had gone from the room with him, and I lay waiting for her return. The fear that had been so intense with me had died now, for May had detected at once the imposition which had been practised upon Mr. Fortescue, for the purpose of winning money from him for silence. There was again no shadow upon my child's future, and if Ernest Fortescue waited a little——

Just as my thoughts paused there, she came back to me; entering very quietly, and passing her empty chair, she moved softly about the room, I watching her in the firelight. But when she had no more excuse for passing by my call, she came up to the head of my couch, and leaned behind me, there where I could not see her face.

"So, May," I said, as easily and naturally as I could, "the old Hall is to be vacant again—for a time. Dear," I went on, presently, for she had not answered me, "when do you think the young squire will return?"

"Never, John."

"But, May," I cried, with a failing attempt to turn and read her face, "do you forget your promise to me?"

"I kept it, John," my child said, gently. "He came for my answer that morning, and I said—what I promised I would say. I did indeed."

"And why——"

"That very day, afterwards," my darling said, trying to calm me with her gentle touch upon my shoulder, "I asked him to forgive me for—not having understood. And he was generous, and forgave me."

"Oh, my love—and this was because I fell into a useless, helpless nursling, and let you sacrifice your time, and health, and liberty! Are you to forfeit all to me, even your happiness?"

"No, John. Oh, no! I consented to go to my mother's home because you seemed so much to wish it, and said it was best for me. I was sure you knew, because you always had done what was best for me. I never guessed how soon I should understand enough to be quite sure that, in your great kindness to me, you had mistaken. I told him this, and he was very patient with me, John."

"And you sacrificed yourself so utterly, my darling, for your old guardian's sake!"

"Hush!" my child whispered, very low and earnestly. "It was no sacrifice. Don't you remember how I said to you even then, John, 'If my own home is dearer to me than my mother's, why should I change?'"

"Oh! May," I cried, "tell me in few words, but in true words what I may understand, even while I cannot see your face. Is that true? Is the old home dearer to you than your mother's?"

"Yes."

"And even Ernest Fortescue——"

"Knows," my child answered, very softly in my pause, "and has known for many weeks, that I could never love the life he offered me as I have loved the old life here. And," she went on, with a sudden change of tone, and laying her fingers softly on my forehead, as if she knew how it was throbbing with an unfamiliar pain, "I don't know how I am to keep my promise to you now, John, for my mother's home is to be empty."

"Some one else will come," I said, with a fierce grasp of my failing strength; "and, whoever he may be, he is sure to want to steal you from me. They all have wanted to do so. Even if the mysterious old owner comes himself, he will be sure to ask for you presently. I shall get used to it, I suppose, in time."

"It is to be hoped he will come, as I have to keep my promise," remarked my child.

"Yes, and it will be easier then, as he will really own the Hall. And suppose he were as handsome as Ernest Fortescue, and as good a man, and as pleasant, and as clever, and as rich, and as young—could you resist him then if he asked you the old question? Would you then accept the home that used to be your mother's?"

"I could resist him, John, even then."

"You would say——"

"I should say, 'Please leave me at the farm, for I am happiest there.'"

"And suppose," I went on, my heart beating with a pain in every throb, though I tried so hard to speak lightly—"never mind how silly my words sound, May—suppose, when he came, he dared to ask you the same question, yet was not such a one as Ernest Fortescue, was not handsome and good, and pleasant, and clever, and rich, and young, but was even such a one as—myself?"

"He could not be."

"Scarcely," I acknowledged, brokenly. "But try to suppose he were, and yet asked you to—to accept his home."

"Then I should say"—I could not see my child's eyes, but I heard the faltering of her sweet low voice—"I will come."

"I am not jesting, May," I cried. "Oh, do not jest to me in your answer! If he were such as myself?"

"I understand you, John. It is an impossible case. But, if it were possible, I should say, 'I will come.' The Hall and the farm would be the same to me then."

"Oh, my darling, remember this is to be truth! With such a one as myself?"

"With such a one," she said, and smiled a little as she came to my side and held out both her hands. "I could be happy anywhere."

"Oh, May," I cried, and drew her to me with my unmaimed hand, that she might not see the womanish tears, "think what this means, the hope that you are giving me! Tell me, could you live happily in your mother's home—with me?"

"Have I not always lived happily with you, my own dear guardian?" answered May.

"But—oh, my child, try to understand me, for this hope is so strange and strong! Could you live happily in the old home your mother loved—as my—wife?"

I think that something of the great strength and humility of my love must have been written in my face, for her eyes were lowered, and her lips trembled as I spoke. But when she looked up to answer me, I saw a new look upon her face, and, ah me, such a warmth and tenderness in her lovely eyes!

"I don't know, John. But I could try."

"Oh, my love, my love!" I whispered. And then I could say no other word, so weak I was, and so unfitted with any speech for my great gratitude.

"You have talked too much this evening, John. Now let us sit quite still a little and rest."

My darling was on her own little chair beside my couch, and she leaned her cheek against it, as she sat so still in the fire-light; while I held her hand in mine, and watched the bright and happy face, with what nameless love and pride and gratitude!

"In a few moments, darling. It seems a dream to me yet that you have consented to stay with me all your life. Yet you must keep that promise you made me, May, one night in the moonlight."

"Then you must tell me how."

"You must go, my love, and take your mother's place in the dear old home she loved."

"Not without you, John."

I laughed a little. It was so exactly what she used to say to me when I would try to persuade her to accept those urgent invitations that came to her from the Hall. And it was such a jest as she said it now!

"No, not without me, dear. I can never spare you to go anywhere without me now."

"So you see you will be obliged to release me from that promise, John," said May.

"Yes, dear, if you wish it. But the home that was your mother's is yours now, May. I bought it to give as a wedding gift to my child. I used to dream how, on your wedding morning, I would tell you and Ernest that the old home was yours, bought long ago with uncle Joshua's wonderful savings. How I had bought it for you—Ah, such a slight return from your old guardian for the happy years you had given him! Yet now——"

"Now, John, for the first time in my life—let me confess it at last," interrupted May. "I have always been so afraid of doing so—for the first time in my life, at this moment, I love the old home just as you have always so easily taken it for granted that I should love it, while you were building my future for me."

"And while you——"

"While I," she said—and there stole into her cheeks the soft pink colour that bore a different message for me now—"knew that this future could never satisfy me. Oh, John, how I should have clung to these last days with you, if I had really been going away!"

It was no dream, no jest. It was not compassion in her face. It was something that never, even through one hour of her sweet childish life, had I felt possible; something that made me look back with keen self-pity for the man who had never dreamed of such an hour for himself as this; and made me——

"May darling,"—it was but a broken whisper after all, while I lifted the bright face to mine, just as I used to do when she was such a tiny child—"you have not told me that you accept that gift of mine. If you could but know what delight it has been to me to fancy your acceptance of it! My one gift to my child!"

"Your one gift to your child, John," she said, taking my one hand, big as it was, into both of hers, as I believe she could not have done a month before, "has been what I could never put into words. But I will tell you of it sometimes, on other days. This last gift is not to be mine yet. You know *when* you said you intended to give it me."

"You will take it from me on our wedding-day, my love?"

"Yes. Not till then. To-day I have taken enough. Oh, John, what happiness is in my soul to-night!"

"Dear, if you only knew what you have given me!"

"Nothing," she whispered, with her dear truthful eyes lifted to mine. "All that you have of mine I gave you long ago—unasked."

And then I think I tried to tell her a little of what she had been to me, ever since first I brought my little blessing into the solitary home. But she would not listen

A DARK INHERITANCE.



CHAPTER I.

“WHAT a pity it was!”

Though these exact words were in my heart, I scarcely knew what thought they interpreted, as I stood at the window watching for a horseman's figure on the road. My brother was never known to be late for dinner, and it was now only half-past five o'clock, yet there I stood, as eagerly watching for the first glimpse of Psyche's head beyond the primly-cut hedge of our lawn as if it were an hour behind our dinner-time, instead of an hour before it.

“What a pity it was!”

Edgar and I were just as happy as we could be together, and a separation would be very hard upon either of us. Why should it even be supposed possible that either of us would voluntarily leave the other? Why should Donald Ramsay's last visit have left a disturbing shadow on the surface of this calm, unruffled life of ours—my brother Edgar's and mine?

Ah, there was Psyche trotting through the lawn gate, which Edwards held open for his master, and there were Edgar's happy eyes seeking me in this my usual lounging-place! What a pleasant time for me was this hour of my brother's return, after his daily absence in town! And what a pleasant home-coming it always was to him! Could I, by any word of mine, change this home-coming into loneliness for him? Or could ever another face bring home to me the happiness that my brother's brought?

A thousand times—no!

I went out through the open window, and met Edgar on the lawn, as I always did; and he gave Psyche into Edward's charge, and linked his arm in mine, with a debonair of the old custom that always pleased me well, though of course I knew I could never be any support to him really; for not only was he older

than I, and so much bigger of course (I being but a slight girl, and he such a finely-made man), but he was, too, so very much wiser, and cleverer, and better.

"Another new dress," he began, in his merry, joking way, as he took a pinch of his sleeve between his fingers. "This makes about the twentieth this spring. I should be in the Bankruptcy Court if you were dependent on me."

"Life itself would be altogether bankrupt of enjoyment for me if I were dependent upon you, Edgar," I said, as we sauntered on across the grass, knowing so well in my heart that it never had signified (and never would) to which of us belonged the money we spent so happily and lavishly—though never recklessly, I trust. "What sort of a day in town, Edgar?"

"Too much work and too much heat. What sort of a day at home, Eunice?"

"More work than yours, and less heat. Didn't you get a turn in the park, then?"

"Oh, yes, just an hour or so!" returned Edgar, stopping to cut himself a half-blown Malmaison for his button-hole. "The row was stupidly empty. I was glad you were not there."

"You looked for me then? You did not forget this time?" I questioned, for I never could allow him to be unreminded that he had once gone by appointment to meet me there, and had come away entirely forgetting whom he had gone to meet.

"No, I didn't look for you," he answered with great readiness. "But I found Ramsay looking for you. I expected to find him here, as he didn't find you there."

"Do you want him?" I asked, a little wistfully, as I detained Edgar on the step of the open drawing-room window, taking his tube from his button-hole to put in fresh water and his Malmaison.

"I want him," he echoed, looking the very personification of aggravation, with his hat at the back of his head, and his mouth screwed up, "and he wants me. He never thinks of anybody in the world but me. I believe that he is coming here to-night to entreat me to go to India with him. You seem to be blushing," he went on, as he touched my cheek with his whip.

"No, I'm not. I don't care which of us he comes to see; but if I thought——"

"If you thought," put in Edgar, "that he came to allure me from the fraternal roof to his own marble halls—the figurative appellation for barracks, dear—you would doubtless feel as fond of him as I do under similar circumstances."

"Oh, Edgar," I cried, my heart beating gladly—for this was exactly what I loved to know he felt, what I did know he felt,

but what I loved to hear him say—"I am so glad you don't want me to go. We are so happy together, aren't we? I want no one but you, Edgar. And I shall feel so much more at ease when Donald has sailed for India—poor Donald!"

"Fruitful compassion," smiled Edgar. "Those two words were added as a second thought; the third thought will be that you prefer his not sailing *alone* to India—poor Donald."

I did not mind his mimicry. I threw his riding-whip upon the floor, and put both my hands into his, looking, I am sure, most unmistakably in earnest now.

"Edgar, just answer me gravely; be as grave as I am for one moment. Could you, willingly, spare me to go away for ever?"

"I would rather not," said Edgar, in just his placid, comfortable way, only his fingers tightened on mine.

"You would miss me?"

"Indeed I should, dear. I should not be able to endure the dear old home without you."

"Then, Edgar," I cried, delightedly; for I could understand, he being a man, how much less he said even than he meant. "you know quite well now whether I could go with Donald. You know how I love the dear old house and everything in it and about it. You know how I love you, Edgar, and never want anyone else. And I only waited to feel sure you wished me to stay—though, indeed, I did feel sure of that before—before telling you there was nothing in the world that would tempt me to leave you and the dear old home."

"Nothing in the world, eh?" repeated Edgar, laughing, while I stood on tip-toe, and kissed him: knowing now most certainly that there was only one answer which I could possibly give to Donald Ramsay when he asked me, in all seriousness, the question he had so often lately tried in vain to ask.

Edgar would miss me, just as I should miss him if he could ever leave me. He had said he should not be able to endure the dear old home without me. So it was all settled. We should spend our lives here together. We should want nothing more. We had all we needed in each other.

After dinner I went into the garden as usual, but on this evening Edgar did not stroll out with me, as he generally did.

"I shall follow you," he said, apparently very busy selecting a cigar. "If I don't you will understand that Ramsay has stepped in, and refuses to part with me. In that case you must spend your evening alone, my dear."

I nodded a grave assent to this, and took my work into the summer-house—no mellow, old, romantic bower, where one sits

among roses and jasmine, but a new and highly-varnished structure, described as *rustic*, which Edgar had bought a few weeks before, and to which I was making brave efforts to grow attached. There was no need to hasten over my work, so I sang to myself, for the same reason that the boy whistled in the poem, "for want of thought." But my lazy, broken version of "The Clang 'o the Wooden Shoon" came to a sudden stop when I saw Donald Ramsay walking rapidly up to the summer-house, looking so strange and pale.

"Donald," I said, working away, and pretending that I did not see anything unusual in his manner when he sat down by me, "isn't this a fine evening?"

As a rule, Edgar and I are not great in discussing the weather, it very seldom occurring to us to discourse of it, because opinions on that subject cannot vary with much piquancy, and such a fact as I had stated to Donald being generally too self-evident to need attention being drawn to it. Still, if Donald had been as polite as usual, I think he would have given me some acknowledgment, however slight, of my observation.

"I think," I said at last, making another fresh and lively start, "that there isn't ventilation enough in this summer-house."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Don't you think so, Donald?"

"Think what?"

Then I laughed, for how could I help it when he was so very absent and such unsatisfactory company?

"Forgive me, Eunice," he said, touching my hand as if he pleaded that I should put down my work. "I was not thinking of what you said, though I was thinking wholly of you."

"Silly of you, Donald," I answered, putting down my work, as he wished, and looking into his anxious eyes. "I am not worthy of such grave, long thoughts."

"I can judge best of that, my dear," he said, in his gentle, brotherly way. "There is no other thought so sweet and dear to me. But, Eunice, I long for something more to take with me than the memory even of all the delicious hours I have spent in your presence. Give me just a few words of hope, dear Eunice. You know how I love you. You know, as Edgar does, how long you have been everything to me. I have made you see this, Eunice, though I've often feared you didn't care to see it; and now I am come to ask you for one word of hope to live upon through the long months before I see you again."

"Oh, Donald, please," I faltered, for it hurt me sadly to see him deeply in earnest, and to feel in my own mind that I cared

so little for these words from him; "I like you so much. You are like another brother to me—almost; you and Edgar are like brothers. Please to think of me as your sister, and then I can care for you always."

"No other way," he queried, very low.

"No other way, Donald," I answered, almost as low, "for I shall never leave Edgar."

"Then it is only the old plea still?" he questioned, in an eager way. "There is nothing else between us, Eunice? Only your love for Edgar?"

Only my love for Edgar! Could it possibly be that Donald fancied I could ever change in *that*?

"Even though you tell me not to hope," he went on, hurrying a little (I think because there reached us just then the faint scent of Edgar's cigar), "I must do so. Why should I not, when I have no rival but your brother, and he himself will marry some day."

"I don't think he will," I put in gently, as I gathered up my work. Of course I might have contradicted Donald more decidedly, only how could I when he looked so anxious? "We like to live as we are doing now. Edgar is quite happy, and indeed he said only to-day that he should not be able to endure the dear old home without me."

"It was a selfish speech," said Donald, hurriedly; "but never mind—I see you are quite happy now. Only there may come a time when he will not deny himself."

"I do not quite understand what you mean by denial?" I said, with a flash of real angry disdain. "Do you suppose that I am *denying myself* when I let you go away—a free man?"

"That is enough, Eunice," he answered, very heavily. "Nothing could more surely and directly have shown me I could go away in no other way. I think there is no room in your heart for anyone but your brother, and, if I go on loving and hoping, only to win another disappointment, at least it will be my own fault. Remember that I told you that; and—and," he went on, his voice faltering as he tried to meet my glance, "it will not be in a man's power, I am sure, to help hoping, for—for you don't pretend to say, Eunice, that you will never love any man but Edgar?"

"Never," I said, in my ignorant confidence. "Never anyone as I love Edgar."

"But this love is different," Donald went on, "and need not interfere with what Edgar possesses and deserves. If you gave me the right to do so, I should show you how different."

"Yes, it would all be different indeed, Donald," I interrupted,

"and I wish no change. Who could ever be to me what Edgar is?"

"That is ridiculous," cried Donald, in quick passion. Yet, though the speech was not polite, how could I resent it when he looked so very troubled? "But it shows me, beyond any doubt, that you don't know what it means to love as—as I do. But it may come, Eunice, and——" He broke off suddenly, rising as he did so, and going on in a different tone. "In little more than a year I shall be back again."

"We shall be delighted to see you, Donald," I said, as cordially as ever I could, for he was an old, old friend to both Edgar and me. "I trust you will find us living here, just as you leave us."

"I trust so too," he said, with a little brightening of his tone. "I shall live through my absence in that hope. And, if your brother is my only rival when I return, I may surely plead my cause once more."

"Don't wait for that, Donald. Don't think of that," I entreated, offering him my hand before we left the summer-house; "there are so many other girls who could make you happy. Why wait?"

"Many other girls who could make me happy, are there?" he echoed, with quick contempt. "Could and would. All right. I'll go and see. I shall ask Miss Hilton first. I shall have no rival in any brother of hers. She cares for nobody—but herself."

"And I have given you good advice, Donald, to care for nobody—but her."

Then fortunately we both laughed, for we both disliked Flora Hilton very much. Not that I knew much of her, for I had persistently refused to do so, and successfully avoided being obliged to know her. Only how can I think of her without contempt when she is so very—no, why should I write a word against her? Surely that kind of nature must bring its own most bitter punishment in the lovelessness of its own life. And what a punishment! Why, Flora's brothers are never with her, and her father saunters home from the station every evening as if he did not care how large a piece of his leisure time he had spent before he reached his daughter. An acquaintance of Edgar's dines there sometimes, and tries afterwards to make us laugh about her vanity and worldly wisdom; but Edgar says that is not fair of him, and, indeed, I go away whenever he speaks of her, because I feel so sure of what is coming. She lives about half a mile farther from town than we do, and she used to ride past our lawn very often, but I rarely see her riding now.

I do not know why it was that Edgar never came near us in

the garden this evening. We found him reading at the drawing-room window, in the laziest and coolest manner, just as if he had no guest at all on the premises; but of course Donald scarcely seems so much like a guest as like a brother of ours.

When tea was over, and our desultory chat, and we had seen Donald off; standing ourselves at the gate in the quiet summer twilight, to nod and smile when he looked back; Edgar put his hand on my shoulder, with only half a laugh.

"Oh, my lover, broken-hearted! Oh, my Donald, mine no more!"

"You are glad, Edgar?" I queried, wistfully, drawing round my neck the hand that lay upon my shoulder. "You are glad that nothing is to separate us two? No one else will ever imagine it now Donald is gone."

"I'm delighted to know that Ramsay is the only idiot in creation."

"And are you really glad?"

"Delighted, dear," he answered, in his genial, hearty way.

And for all the time we lingered together, out in the tranquil summer twilight, I knew Edgar felt as pleased and content as I did, to think of the happy and united life that lay before us. Did I not remember how he had said he could not be happy in the dear home without me? And was not he very, very happy now? Yet—I wonder whether we women have many things harder to us than that dismal pain of feeling there has been lavished upon us a great and generous love which we can never return; and which, of course, in no other way can we repay, or even seem to appreciate.

CHAPTER II.

It seemed strange to us at first not having Donald coming in at all hours, and under any pretence. We talked of our old friend very often, but I never found him filling my thoughts in solitary, silent, happy times. We often wondered where he was, and what he was doing, and whether he was thinking of us, or gradually growing to forget us; but the dear old home was never shadowed for one single hour by any deep regret or vain longing for him.

When his first Indian letter came to Edgar, there was a message in it for me; a simple little message, exactly like one of Donald's own speeches, asking if—as an old friend of my brother's as well as of my own—he might write to me sometimes during his absence.

But when Edgar was writing, and asked me what he was to say in answer to that question, I sent Donald word not to write to me, as I read my brother's letters, and so should know all about his Indian life. But I begged Edgar to say it very nicely, and that we should both be glad when our old friend came back to England.

The beautiful summer, that was in its glory when Donald went away, was over, and not even its last faint, sad memories, always so slow to die, were left us. We had had a whole wet, cheerless week, but this one afternoon I had grown so very tired of being a prisoner in the house, or of driving in a closed carriage (which I always did dislike so much), that I determined to defy the rain, and walk to the station to meet Edgar. Of course the wet walk would not be very pleasant on our very uninteresting road, but then I should have Edgar on the way back.

Even before I started, the rain ceased, and the sky began to clear, so that I set forth quite cheerfully, in my warm, weather-proof costume; delighted to lose that wretched feeling of weariness and low spirits which had had such an obstinate grip upon me all day.

Edgar did not often come from town by train, and even when he did it was a most rare and unusual thing for me to meet him, so I knew he would be much astonished when he saw me. I liked to picture, as I went along, the laugh of pleasure he would give, and the merry way in which he would tease me all the way home.

Edgar always travelled by the fast train that reached our station at 5.30, and it was exactly due when I looked up at the clock in the booking-office. I passed back again, and waited outside the station, walking decorously up and down. I heard the train come in, only a minute or two behind its time, and then the passengers came out, almost all singly, and—I felt my face growing very pink indeed as I noticed this—all gentlemen.

"Good evening, Miss Compton," said one cheery old gentleman, whom I knew well, though I should scarcely that evening have expected him to recognise me. "Come to meet your brother, are you? He came all right—not in the smoking-carriage to-night—but he is hindered in there, I suppose. May I wait with you?"

Of course I declined, laughingly, not wondering who was talking so much to detain Edgar, because gentlemen do, I think, have very much to say to each other sometimes, quite in the most gossiping and personal manner, though they pretend we women hold the monopoly.

At last, just as I turned again towards the station door, I

caught sight of Flora Hilton coming slowly through it, talking to some one who seemed to have paused to give up her ticket. I was always so unwilling to meet her that I instinctively, in the first moment, lowered my umbrella, and slowly turned, before she could possibly have recognised me. I heard her join her companion, and then go on, laughing and talking still, down into the road. I waited for all sounds of her voice and their steps to cease, and then I looked again for Edgar. No; still he was not in sight, and so—ashamed of being seen waiting any longer, now that all the passengers seemed to have dispersed—I walked down into the road, hoping that that tiresome friend of Edgar's would soon release him.

But—how was it? There was Edgar on before me! And at his side—surely, surely my eyes deceived me. It never could be Edgar walking with Miss Hilton, holding an umbrella over her, stepping like a mincing girl to suit her steps, listening (perhaps without his teeth on edge) to that affected voice and laugh. Could it be Edgar who was doing this, and had passed me by unrecognised?

I felt my eyes growing very wide and hot as I followed along the wet, familiar road, uglier than ever in my eyes just then. I went very slowly, for I would not overtake them, and *they* went slowly. I saw Edgar pass his own gate to go on with his companion, as if he did not even know it was our home that he had reached; and I fancied she took no notice either, but went on with him as if it were a usual and natural thing for them to pass the gate I might have been so eagerly watching from my old nook in the window. I would never watch again, never; for, if I saw him come with her, and go by without a glance, oh, how much more angry I should feel with her than I had any right to do!

I do not think, at least, I am sure I never entered our home so sadly as I did that evening, yet while I dressed for dinner (feeling to have so much time because Edgar was not yet come in) I grew ashamed of myself. What harm would it do Edgar to walk a mile or so at the side of any girl? And what more natural than that he should do so this afternoon, when most probably she had no umbrella? So, though it had been such a wet and dull day, and people so naturally felt dull and dismal in dismal weather, I would not greet my brother with a gloomy face, or fancy the possibility of things that were never likely to happen.

When Heynes had left the dining-room, and Edgar and I were loitering over our dessert, I spoke out to him, just as like my old self as I possibly could, though (for the first time in my

life) I realised my brother being unlike *his* old self; the difference was very little, but it was there.

"Edgar, didn't you——" No, it should not be a question. With a quickening of my pulses, I vaguely felt it would be kinder to Edgar not to make it a question. "Edgar, I saw you pass our gate with Miss Hilton this afternoon. You can imagine how surprised I was!"

"Oh, you saw us, did you?" *Us!* The word struck me like a blow. "She came by the express, and I walked home with her. She said it would be such a wretched walk, because she had no hand at liberty for her umbrella."

"And she knew you had a hand at liberty?" I questioned, quite absently, in my vexation, and only recalled to what I had said by Edgar's hearty laugh.

"That was it, my dear; and she knew, as that woman sings in the road,

'Tis 'ard to give the 'and w're the 'art can never be!"

"Edgar," I said, in the very saddest earnestness, "you look as if you enjoyed speaking of her; that flippant, heartless, crafty gir—woman!"

"Whom do you mean?"

And I knew in a minute by his tone, when he asked that, that in all my life I had never before made him feel to me as he felt then, coldly and carelessly annoyed. He had been angry sometimes, and impatient often, and merrily disdainful now and then; but had never spoken to me in that tone before.

I could not trust myself to answer, for the tears were rushing quick and hot to my eyes, and I was trying hard to prevent their coming into sight. I had been but a dull companion to him since he came in, and the weather was so depressing too. No, he should surely have no sight of tears to dispirit him, so I turned the conversation, and we were chatting merrily, with no idea we had lingered so long, when Heynes came in to say that he had carried in the tea. How Edgar laughed as he waltzed me through the hall—Heynes had disappeared, in his grave, decorous way, but we never minded him, in our most nonsensical hours, because he had known us both when we were no higher than his knee.

But, when the evening was over, Edgar spoke to me rather unexpectedly. Just as I went up to him to say good night.

"Eunice, you are such a cheerful little girl, and ours is such a cheerful house, as poor Ramsay used to say, that I think—at least perhaps you may think—it would be but kind to be a little friendly to Fl—to Miss Hilton, and ask her here sometimes. Her home is rather dull, I believe. The young Hiltons are always away, and Hilton père is no companion for her."

"Did she tell you so, Edgar?" I asked, with a great sinking at my heart.

"Yes; at least she——"

"Said that of her father?" I questioned, quietly.

"Oh, no, of course not!" returned Edgar, with a rather forced laugh. "But she said how bitterly she felt the want of young companionship, because her people——"

"That will do, Edgar," I said, turning away. "Never mind telling me what she said to you of her own home. I simply never could be friendly with Miss Hilton, and I should only tell a fib if I said I would try to call her by the name of friend—one of the sweetest words on earth—but,"—the tears were coming again behind my eyes, but still he should not see them—"I will never be unkind or impolite to anyone you—wish to know, and to—be hospitable to."

And then I went away as quickly as I could.

CHAPTER III.

SATURDAY afternoon is always a half-holiday for Edgar, and so Saturday is my gala day of all the week. It is very rarely indeed that we do not spend that time together, though of course it is not always that we spend it alone, we two. We have both a good many friends, and they are often with us; though we sometimes say we enjoy our holiday more when we have a long ride together, and dine together perhaps, before our return, we two, in a crowd, gleaning fun and enjoyment out of everything we see or hear.

Luncheon was waiting, and I in my habit was waiting too, for Edgar. I had watched for him along the road beyond the lawn, until my eyes ached from the fruitless strain, whilst I heard Edwards briskly talking to the horses in the distance. Then I went in and sat down to the piano, glad to pass away, not in utter idleness, a little of this wasted hour through which I had expected Edgar. He came into the room almost as soon as I began to play, and I rose in a moment to meet him. He should see that I was quite ready, though I would not remind him how long I had been kept waiting.

"Do you think, Eunice," he said, hurrying through the words, "you would mind—you are a generous girl, and I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind lending Juno to Miss Hilton. She has no horse to ride, and she has been out of health for a few weeks, you know."

"I do not know," I put in, with my fullest gaze. "Why should I know—unless you tell me?"

"Well, you might have known," he answered, still seeming ill at ease, "if you had cared to ask."

"Of course," I assented, in quiet disdain. "I might have sent for daily bulletins."

"I didn't say she had been seriously ill," interrupted Edgar, colouring angrily; "but you need not be ironical."

"What has been prescribed for her, Edgar. Heart or nature?"

"A ride," said Edgar, colouring still more as he spoke, because his inclination was evidently to answer me in my own spirit, while his policy forbade it. It was such a strange and sad new light in which to see my brother! "I thought perhaps, as Psyche will not carry a lady, you wouldn't mind lending Juno for this one afternoon. You see you can ride any day, and Flora—as she says——"

"You needn't tell me what she says," I answered; and in all my life I never felt so wicked as just at that moment. "I don't suppose it was true, whatever it was. Last time we saw her riding you told me her horse was one of Harris's hacks; and that the man she rode with was a scamp."

I said it out quite fearlessly, for I had not yet learned the bitter lesson that sisters sometimes have to learn, that the shadow of another woman has risen like an ice barrier between the old time and the new. But I learnt it then, I think. I think so, because of that weary sinking at my heart. Yet, when Edgar turned so coldly away from me, I stepped forward—so eagerly as nearly to fall over my habit—and begged him to lend my horse to whom he chose, for that I did not care to ride this afternoon.

My unshed tears nearly choked me as I said it, but I did not break down even when I said I did not care to ride; nor was it a fib now, for all the pleasure of my holiday afternoon was dead. Surely Edgar must have seen how much I was in earnest, yet he walked on out of the room without a word to me. And that was my bitterest pain of all, to see that he was too deeply hurt with me even to accept that little favour at my hands. For a few minutes I was bewildered in this new feeling; then there came a horror of his leaving me in this way, and I went out to the yard, feeling sure I should find him there, coldly countermanding the order for the horses. I found him just in the act of mounting Psyche, and I felt in a moment how cold and stern he had been, for there was no sign of either of the grooms or of my own bright chestnut.

"You need not have sent Juno back, Edgar," I said, plead-

ingly; "I will say nothing more that is rude or unkind. Please take Juno for—for your friend. Don't look so stern, Edgar. Do this as a favour to me."

"That's a very good resolution to make, my dear," he answered, almost in his usual tones. "It isn't like my little Eunice to be either rude or unkind."

"Where is Edwards?" I asked, looking hurriedly round, sorry that the passionate colour would rush so readily to my face. "Let him bring out Juno for Miss Hilton, and—you will forget all I have said, Edgar?"

"Yes, I'll forget," returned Edgar smiling, as he patted the sleek, bright neck of his little mare. "I've sent Edwards on with Juno, dear, to Miss Hilton; for I knew you were sorry for your flash of ill-temper. She will be very prettily grateful to you, and I shall bring her back with me to thank you. I am sure she will insist on doing that. She said——"

But I was obliged, even in spite of my best resolutions, to interrupt him there.

"I shall be out when you bring Miss Hilton back, Edgar."

"Nonsense!" he said, pausing one moment with his foot in the stirrup. "You are just going in to have a chat and five o'clock tea with the Lyons, and you will be at home as soon as I am."

He had not said "we" this time—so I did not contradict or argue any more. He kissed me, and I could return the smile with which he looked back at me from the gate.

I tried my best not to feel very low as I went into the house and took off my habit, and again, in my effort to drive away moody and discontented thoughts, I went to the piano. I opened the first music that came to my hand, a book of Heller's sweet little dreamy studies, and I played them softly, fitting my thoughts to them, like the words of a whispered song. But they grew to sad at last, and I broke off in a flood of passionate and miserable tears.

The tears did me good, though, after all, if only because they made me decide to go in and have a chat with the Lyons, that I might lose all traces of my loneliness and moodiness before Edgar came home. I was greatly tempted, when Mr. Lyon brought me home, to ask him to come in and dine with us, but I fancied Edgar might think I wished to avoid a *tête-à-tête* with him, and I would not for anything that he should think that. I wondered—oh, how I had been wondering all the afternoon!—whether he fancied I ought to have sent an invitation to Miss Hilton.

That very thought was in my heart, when Edgar himself scattered it happily by his greeting in the hall at home.

"I was just coming," he said, in a bright, excited way, "to snatch you from the Lyons' den."

"I shall be down in two minutes," I cried, and ran upstairs, never giving Esther time to help me in my dressing.

"Now, Edgar, what do you say to my speed?"

I entered the drawing-room, saying it to Edgar because I saw him standing there in the lamplight, smiling to see me; but all in a moment I felt dumb and deaf and stupid, for there was Miss Hilton standing near him, looking just as much at home in this drawing-room of ours as if she knew she were to be at home there from that day. What need had I to be self-reproachful, for she had not felt *my* invitation necessary. She had not hesitated in taking me thus unawares, for she laughed about it as she came forward, with her hand outstretched, thanking me profusely, not to say gushingly, for the beautiful ride she had had that afternoon.

"But how—" I said, but could stupidly say no more, while I looked down upon her evening dress of gauzy pink, open at the neck, and with no sleeves below the elbows. She had not ridden in *that* costume!

"How have I changed my dress, do you mean?" she questioned, laughing, as her eyes took in every item of mine. "Why, when your brother came for me, and so kindly insisted on my dining with you after our ride, he suggested—or," with a glance across at him, *I* suggested—indeed I quite forget *who* suggested, that I should send a dress down. It is so altogether and utterly impossible to dine comfortably in one's habit, isn't it, Miss Compton? How very lovely those fuchsias are in your hair and at your neck! But I always heard you were great in flowers here. Captain Ramsay—poor fellow, I'm so delighted to hear that he likes India—used to say to me sometimes, 'Your flowers are as pretty as Eunice Compton's;' and I thought that great praise."

"But, Miss Hilton," I said, in the very easiest sort of way, though my head was aching through her, "Captain Ramsay did not know you, nor did he ever speak of ladies by their Christian names."

Fortunately, at that moment dinner was announced, and so I had no need to notice Edgar's hasty interruption of our discussion. After that I would rather not write down anything more we said to each other all the evening. It was a wretched evening to me, but the others seemed to enjoy it very much. Miss Hilton never tired of talking, and only stopped while she sang and played. And Edgar listened to her untiringly, and laughed at speeches that somehow could not win the faintest of smiles from me."

Mr. Compton, you deceived me in your sister," she said, with a laugh, as we all together returned to the drawing-room after dinner; "you said she was merry, and I positively think her quieter than my mother, who is dull enough to propagate melancholia in a whole family—not that I institute any comparison here. I only think it refreshing to see a young girl in our days so very sedate and proper. It makes me quite ashamed of being gay and natural. I ought to apologise, I'm sure. How shall I do it, Mr. Compton? Do tell me. I'm so deliciously ignorant in the ways of the world."

"Then I fear you don't play," said I, icily.

"Oh, yes, I play—just a little," she said; "and I sing—a little. But all I do is to please or amuse those who listen, and so I rarely play anything of your kind. It only bores those who are kind enough to listen to one, though they will try not to let one see it. Oh, I've found that out, for I can notice people's feelings, though I'm not clever—like you, Miss Compton."

"She sang a little song with a French refrain—"Loyal je serai durant ma vie,"—and, when each time the words occurred she glanced into Edgar's face to meet his eyes as she sang it, I—I just felt as bad and wicked as ever I could be. But Edgar seemed to like it, for he got up and went to the piano, and stood looking down upon her with a smile. When she had finished she insisted on his singing with her, and talked through all his objections, and chose a duet and—indeed I scarcely know by what manœuvres—drew him into it. Now Edgar never attempts anything beyond a comic song of small compass, and so I was indeed surprised—not to say distracted—to hear him floundering through one of Mendelssohn's gems. He laughed much when he hopelessly broke down at last, but Miss Hilton told him he had made a splendid attempt "for his first," and that next time it would be capital.

Next time! She intended to come again, then!

When at last she said she really *must* go—just as if we were urging her with all our might to stay—Edgar put on his coat, and they set off together.

Then I looked round the empty room, and drew one hand wearily across my forehead. I would not wait for my brother's return, for I would say no word more to him that night. With a catch in my breath now and then which felt like a sob, I put aside the music, and closed the piano. How its notes would have sobbed with me if I had tried to play! On one of the tables lay an unfinished sketch of mine, and on the margin Edgar's hints and jests were scribbled, with a caricature of himself, lengthened out gauntly so that the bottom of the paper had found me only

at his waist, and there was scribbled across it in Edgar's writing, "To be continued." What nonsense it all was, and yet to-night there seemed a knell in every echo of those happy, careless times.

Then somehow it came over me that I could get no rest until I had seen him again—without that new friend of his—and had had one of the old good-night kisses.

If my thoughts had not been so busy, I think I should have felt it very long to wait for Edgar, because just as he came in at last and roused me from my reverie before the dying fire, the little Cupid on our timepiece struck his midnight bell. I saw in a moment that my brother was surprised to find me there, and I saw too that he was more sorry than surprised; and yet his face was full of some new jubilant excitement.

"Eunice, congratulate me and make haste to bed, dear. You look very tired to-night, and have been very dull. Of course you admire Flora very much."

"Admire her!"

"Don't cavil over a word, Eunice," Edgar said, but far too happy himself to be angry with me. "One of the oddest things in nature is that two charming women do not always necessarily admire each other. Well, you will soon grow to love her, I expect. Indeed I don't see how you can help it."

"How could not help it then, Edgar?"

"In deed I could not," he said, looking merrily down upon me, as he stood with his back to the dead fire, "and I have told her so to-night."

"It never entered into my head to ask, 'What did she say?'" I seemed to know so well. I only asked,

"When is she coming here—to live?"

"As soon as ever she will. I see no need for delay. I hope her mother will be induced to spare her."

"I fancy she will."

"And," Edgar went on, unobservant, to all seeming, of that quiet, scornful little interruption, "there will be very little to do here in preparation for her coming."

And this was the romance of my brother's wooing! But perhaps it is better, after all, for there to be no romance at all. Only—only—what a puzzle life is!

"Very little here to do," I answered Edgar, as readily as I could; "but I should like to know as long beforehand as possible, because I shall have to choose another home."

"Eunice!"

That was the only word he said for many minutes, but I never saw him look so much astonished, and, indeed, so really hurt;

never in my life. Yet could he really have fancied that I should live in the dear old home when it must be so different to me? Scarcely that, I think; but he had never thought of my future at all, or of the possibility of his plans changing mine.

"Didn't you tell Ramsay you were far too fond of me to leave me, Eunice?"

"Yes, I told him so," I answered, wincing painfully.

"And you must keep your word," was my brother's light rejoinder. "Your place is here, my dear."

"But it is going to be filled by—some one else."

"Not yours," said Edgar, rather proudly. "Flora will have her own place here."

"And that," I answered, sorry that my voice sounded so sad, but determined to keep back the tears, "will include mine."

"Nonsense! I am sure you will be far happier with Flora than you can be now you are so much alone; she is so gay and amusing. I must never again hear you talk foolishly about going away from here. I like you here."

"So you said once before," I answered, still holding back the tears, "and I believed you. But—that seems a long time ago."

"You are tired, dear," he said, with again the shocked look into my face. "I am very sorry to have kept you up so late, and see you now so pale. I will send your breakfast up in the morning. A long rest will do you good, and I shall have to be up early, because I am going in to speak to Mrs. Hilton. Good-night once more."

I went upstairs without being able to answer him a word, for I felt strange and weak as I had never felt before in all my life, and was afraid of breaking down. Yet I knew that my purpose was strong and immovable, though like a faint sad echo came the memory of my brother's words (once so pleasant to recall), "I shouldn't be able to endure the dear old home without you."

CHAPTER IV.

No need to tell you of those spiritless days as they passed. My brother and Miss Hilton were an engaged couple now, and almost every day, when they were not together elsewhere, she was with us. He never confessed that he was aware of any difference between her manner to me and to him; yet I think even he, in all his unaccountable infatuation, must have seen it.

At first my brother had been very angry when I mentioned anything about leaving him on his marriage. But gradually

he seemed learning to see for himself that it was best—gradually, after one wretched interview, when, in a strange, impatient, and suspicious manner utterly unlike my brother, he had asked me if this unnatural determination of mine meant that I was going out to join Captain Ramsay.

I think it was many moments before I could answer him, while my cheeks burned and my eyes seemed all aflame.

"I know," I said at last, when I could speak, "whose thought that is, and who would think it no shame."

Then I broke down utterly for the first time, and after that Edgar gradually left off urging me to stay with him. Even in his opinion of me, even in his love for me, he had changed since he had known Flora Hilton; and that showed me plainest of all, of what kind was her influence over him.

She had encouraged him at last so successfully that one night when he returned from her house he volunteered to ask me whether I had made any definite plans, and whether I did not wish his assistance.

"This is my plan," I said, laying my hand on the sheet of paper which, strange to say, I had been that very hour filling. "I shall try to join some lady who lives alone and in the country—I would not stay near London—and who will be able to live all the more pleasantly for company, and all the more easily for what I shall pay. What fortune have I, Edgar? It seems so strange to ask, for I have always cared so little."

"You know, dear, that one fourth of the business is your own," he answered in quite a business way. "Do you wish to sell out?"

"Only if you wish it, Edgar. Why should I? I only want to understand at what rate I may live. I should not like to miss everything I have been accustomed to, but I don't wish to be extravagant, or to run into debt."

"I wish you wouldn't give yourself the chance," said Edgar, with a sort of fleeting spasm of regret. "Tear up that advertisement, and stay here."

"What will my income be then, Edgar?"

"Well, you may certainly count upon four hundred a year," he answered, in his clear, decisive way, "but most probably two years in every three you will have five hundred."

"Thank you; that is all I wished to know."

"And, Eunice," my brother went on presently, when he had coolly read through the draft of my advertisement, "remember that you take Juno and your own phaeton, and you must take any other of your own things—the grand piano, for instance. And take Esther; you would miss her so—not that she would

stay behind, when you go, I'm certain, so I only make a virtue of necessity. And—but I daresay you will be back in a few——”

“Oh, hush, Edgar!” I cried, at last, fearing that at another word I should sob aloud, in this strange, unutterable loneliness.

CHAPTER V.

I HAD many answers to that advertisement of mine, and some of them amused me a little, and some made me feel very sad indeed, teaching me, as they did, how very many lonely women there are in this strange world of ours—of which each one of us can see and know so very little. But from the first I had set one letter apart from the rest, and pertinaciously fixed my mind upon it; not for any one reason in particular, but for several reasons. It was from a lady who lived alone in a country house called Westerwood, near one of the small historical towns of the North of Ireland. This would be far from my old home, and I wanted to be far—surely I must be far away before I could learn to long for any home in which Flora Hilton would live. Then the lady who wrote to me wrote very kindly and openly and honestly—so it seemed—and without praising her house and neighbourhood and neighbours, as nearly all my correspondents had done. She told me she lived in rather a lonely house, and longed for a young companion, enclosing me two photographs; one of herself, a placid, gentle-looking old lady, with a vague shadow of sorrow in her eyes, and the unmistakable *casket* of good birth in her whole appearance; and one of her house, a picturesque, ivy-covered Gothic house, not very large, but with a delicious look of home about it, even to me, and peeps and vistas through the gardens, charming indeed to a London girl.

I waited rather anxiously to hear what Edgar would say to these two photographs, but he said very little; indeed he scarcely could have said less than he did. Mrs. Luard seemed to him a very ordinary old lady, he said, and he should fancy Westerwood would be a lonely place. What was I to do in such isolation, and with only a solitary old lady for companion, after the life to which I had been accustomed?

“I don't know. I will tell you afterwards, Edgar,” I said.

“Well,” he exclaimed, tossing down the photographs, “Flora may say what she likes about your being wise in your present decision, but I think you are silly. Don't be in a hurry to write to any of these people.”

"I have written to Mrs. Inuard," I explained, wondering why he had betrayed that Miss Hilton called me *wise* for going, "and I have said I will go."

"Then I suppose there is nothing more to be said," returned Edgar, with a laugh. "She sends you the address of her rector, I see. Eunice, what an independent spirit you are developing!"

I smiled at that. I had so little really of the spirit of independence that every day I trembled lest Edgar should find this out. I was so very sorry to be leaving him. I was so really frightened at the thought of going off alone to a new home, though I was a woman of twenty-one, who ought to have been experienced in travelling and managing for herself. Never once at that time did it strike me that Edgar ought to have taken any responsibility from me just then, or made sure himself that I had chosen prudently and circumspectly—never once till afterwards!

Soon after that came Edgar's wedding day. I was very busy just before it, preparing the house for Edgar's wife, and preparing for my own journey, so I had but little time to indulge in any discontented or foreboding thoughts, from which, through every hour of the day, I was striving to be free. I thought of Donald Ramsay a good deal at this time, always pleasantly and gratefully. He was so thoroughly a part of the old sunny life that no wonder, in this second and more bitter parting I should be reminded of my parting from him. I missed his pleasant companionship; yet even now I never longed for it, as I sometimes found myself longing for all that I missed now in my brother.

It was on the night before his wedding that we bade our last good-bye—Edgar and I. For what could we say to each other next morning, except what all the world might hear? And there was a comfort in this. I knew I should not wake on the morrow to the home without Edgar. We should still have some hours to be near each other, though there would be no more sweet companionship. And the parting on that day could not be very sad, because so many eyes would be upon us, and so much gaiety everywhere. Suppose I had consented to Edgar's first plan, to wait for his return, and let him take me to my new home. Could I ever have borne him to leave me alone in that strange house and strange country, while he went back alone to our home that used to be—and is—so dear.

No; it was better as it was, that Edgar and I should turn that last good-night into our first good-bye, yet tell each other (with the last of those long kisses, when even Edgar's cheek was wet against my own) that it was "only good-night."

Next day Edgar and Flora were married, and, while Edgar

waited near, she kissed me coldly, and told me she should be happy to see me whenever I wished to visit London.

Then Edgar, in a whisper, bade me remember that the old home must always seem as much mine as theirs, and that—— But he broke off there, with a hurried word of blessing, and a kiss that—what wonder that it was long and clinging, because there was to be nothing afterwards but memory?

CHAPTER VI.

No after-days, I think, can ever seem quite so long as these first days in my new home have seemed. I scarcely trust myself to write about them even yet, for fear that in my loneliness, I should write ungratefully or complainingly. I have Esther with me, and she looks very like a bit of the old home; and I have Juno and my own phaeton, so that out-of-doors I can often play tricks with my imagination, as I ride or drive, and fancy I may look up presently to see Edgar standing at the lawn-gate at home, waiting for me, as he often used to do, and welcoming me with a smile. But it is not very easy to forget how far apart we are, and how far away the old life is.

Edgar writes most kindly, and has sent me one or two little presents from abroad, just to show how he remembers me; and he hopes I am getting to feel at home and happy here, and he will soon come and see for himself, he says. What can I tell of my home and life here?—for it is so bad for my heart to cling to Edgar now.

Westerwood is indeed a very pretty house, just the sort of house one is certain to grow fond of. The garden is charming to me, with unexpected nooks and glades, like nature herself: though I believe it was all planted and laid out by Mrs. Luard and her husband, after they had bought the house. Of course that is the reason she loves it so well. Why, every tree and flower—even every winding path or quaint old seat—must have a tale to tell her of her husband, and of those happy days. But I fancy that I too presently shall be almost as fond as she is of the sweet, quaint garden, and the picturesque and comfortable old house.

I wish I felt as certain that I should grow to love Mrs. Luard herself. Well, perhaps when I know her well, things will seem less contradictory in her character, and she will lose that restlessness which seems unnatural at her years, and which strikes me as so strange, considering how placid and at ease she *can* look. It accords oddly, too, with her evident enjoyment of all the so-

called good things of this life; ease and idleness, luxurious living and expensive dress, late hours in the morning, and superabundance of servants, a shrinking from all mention of suffering and distress, and an intense pride and care for the countless, rare, and tasteful ornaments of her house. I catch myself watching her very often, and though I try never to let myself be worried over the character of this old lady, I cannot help it. She interests without attracting me, and, while I assure myself I never shall care for her, I am all the while anxious to give her any gleam of pleasure which may possibly be in my power to give. I listen untiringly to the history of every bit of rare old china, and every costly article of furniture, and I grow to feel tender with them, and fond of them, by the very force of sympathy. But I am often wondering how it is that everything was bought either by her husband or herself; not one seems to have come down from father to son, as did so many of our choice and valued things at home, and not one ever seems to have been a present to her from anyone but her late husband. That fact gradually accounted to me for a suspicion, which had grown with me to a certainty, that she was as proud as she was fond of her house and her possessions, and that perfect ease and luxury had not been hers through all her life.

But I made another discovery—the old lady's life held some secret which never quite let go its hold upon her. Whether it affected the past or present, I could never tell—even whether it touched her nearly or afar off I could not know. I only felt conscious of its presence, even of its influence, and longed then the more to smoothen her life for her, because my own too must be so lonely—as I now knew. Sometimes when Mrs. Luard was enlarging to me on the worth or history of her things, I laughed at myself for clinging to a ridiculous notion of anything weighing on this conceited little owner of beautiful and costly knick-knacks; but soon after I would find myself puzzled again, for she had grown cold and curious, and that strange, unnatural restlessness had seized her.

As I said, I tried not to worry about it, and was grateful to find that she grew brighter with me; and now other blessings came, for the first faint touches and suggestions of spring were in the softened air and lengthening daylight, and seemed to touch my soul into a new life.

CHAPTER VII.

EDGAR's letters did not reach me very frequently, but then I knew I was avaricious for them, and never could have been satisfied; and so it was little wonder perhaps that I read them so often that I soon knew them by heart. But this one I never read but once, and then, with all my might, I tried to forget every word. How the birds were singing while I read it, down by the little river beyond the garden, on a half hidden seat to which I always loved to carry Edgar's letters on these fair spring mornings. How merrily the water sang as it passed me by!

I forget what words my brother used. I only know he bade me come back to him at once, because he had discovered that Mrs. Luard was not a suitable friend or chaperon for his sister, as her husband's name had been dishonoured.

It was too late now for my brother to tell me this—I said to myself, sighing with a vague regret at the wonder why he had not thought of discovering all he could before he let me come. I only knew quite certainly that it was too late to tell me now. What ever her husband had been, I would not thus suddenly and suspiciously leave my solitary old lady. But now of course I felt that I knew her secret.

It was just as I thought thus that she came up to me; and at sight of her I quietly tore my brother's letter into fragments, and watched the river carry them away.

But Mrs. Luard had no thought for any letter or any trouble of mine. She was full of a great grievance of her own.

"They are bringing the railway line down here, Eunice," she said, standing before me, too angry, as it seemed, to sit. "It will spoil Westerwood."

But I was too much of a Londoner to be sufficiently depressed by the idea.

"There will be a station in the village perhaps. What a convenience for the people!"

"Convenience?" echoed Mrs. Luard, scornfully. "What a disfigurement for Westerwood! The line must cross the river. The men are at work already marking it."

"I suppose there is seldom any delay when a line is decided upon," said I, placidly; but I rose and went with her towards the house, though she grumbled all the way, even chafing against the fact of the engineer who was here in authority being an American.

I smiled a little over this last complaint, but I was sorry

afterwards, because all these grievances seemed really great to her.

Next day she had grown silent on this subject, and so by luncheon-time I had actually forgotten it. It was a fair, bright afternoon, and I thought I would go and choose some pretty view for a sketch, because I wanted Edgar to have a little painting of some spot near me. I sauntered on and on through the woods, now and then coming out in sight of the river, as it went on southward like myself, and looking anxiously about me for the prettiest peep; but still unsatisfied when I left the woods for good, where the river was wide and shallow. There were huge stones rising from it at intervals, and I saw that I could cross with very little danger even of a wetting. So I did, without a minute's hesitation, for the afternoon was wearing on, and I had loitered unconsciously on my way. There are times, I think, when thought may be said to be—like beauty—only skin deep, and this was such a day for me. I scarcely felt the loneliness which always now lay in my heart. I had gathered flowers as I passed, for the simple pleasure of holding them in my hands and to my lips, and I even sang in broken snatches, as I stepped from stone to stone across the river, and sprang to the other bank among the furze and bracken, climbing while my dress was caught and torn—the first acclivity which I had reached in my long walk.

On the crown of this acclivity, I stopped. Below me, there was fixed a three-legged instrument, and near it stood a man gazing up at me. Steadily and coolly gazing straight into my face, I think, while I held my flowers and my torn dress in one hand, and my sketching folio in the other; and while my ankles must have been terribly visible. Surely that was a camera, and the man was photographing this very bank! What should I look like? I dropped my dress and my flowers as soon as ever this idea had formed itself in my mind; then I sat weakly down upon the bank, just where I was, opened my portfolio, and insanely began to sketch—anything—nothing—just to avoid that dreadful position of standing on an exposed eminence to be stared at or photographed, or turning back at random, and perhaps falling between those stepping-stones, in my attempt to recross the river without sufficient deliberation.

Providentially I felt that no one need ever see my sketch, and so I drew in random lines, fearing to raise my head and put them right, until that formidable machine had been removed. And yet how I did long to set my mind quite at ease about it!

"Do I interfere with your sketch, I and my ungainly instrument?"

At this sudden, unexpected question, I lifted my eyes fully for the first time, and then I saw that the instrument I had dreaded was no camera, and that the gentleman who addressed me was certainly no photographer. Then, all in a minute, I knew what it was, and I looked among the heather.

"Is this to be the new railway-line?" I asked, without the slightest preamble or premeditation.

"Yes; I am cutting its way."

"Then you are the American engineer?"

"If fame has gone before me," he said, in a quiet, prompt way that sat easily upon him, "and you have heard of the advent of *any* American engineer, most assuredly I am he."

I did not say anything more just then; I was so busy thinking. Ought I, now I was cool, to address any further observations to an utter stranger, in such a chance encounter? If he had told me his name (even without an introduction), it would not be so awkward to speak. But then, perhaps, if he did, he would expect to learn mine, and that would make my little adventure quite uninteresting, while, otherwise, there was the romantic uncertainty as to whether he fancied me a young duchess strolling about incognito for my own amusement, and gloriously indifferent to the manners of civilisation; or an aboriginal of the heath, totally and comfortably ignorant of them.

"Is it not rather a waste of labour to sketch this scene?" he asked, presently, standing near me, in the coolest way, while I nervously washed in a cobalt sky, and left splashes of white paper terribly unlike the shifting snowy clouds that glided above us. "Will those little pencilled lines of yours ever really recall to you the glorious outline of those distant hills?"

"Yes, with the help of memory," I said, but not half so sturdily as I would have liked to say it, for I was very busy wondering. "Besides, one who has no knowledge at all of the scene would perhaps value even my poor painting."

"Why did I say it? And in that queer tone, so unfamiliar to me, of mock humility? I was so angry with myself the next moment."

"Especially," my companion answered me—never guessing how nervous my fingers grew under his scrutiny, just, of course, as he could never guess how I had begun this sketch thoughtlessly, as a resource when I had seen him—"if you make a soothing landscape of that rugged heath."

If the notion had not been so absurd, I could almost have fancied some hidden meaning in his words; but then, of course, I knew that was impossible between two utter strangers, such as we were.

"I shall try," I said, quietly.

"Better paint it as it is," he said, "rugged, and bleak, and solitary. You are painting your own thoughts now, not nature. Yet what painter ever did more?" he added at last, lifting his glance from my paper to the distant sky. "The greatest artist in the world only paints out himself."

"According to that theory," I said, looking up for the first time into this stranger's face, "I suppose, when I think I am studying the music of the great masters, I only play—myself?"

"Just so," he answered, readily. "You do not play Handel, Beethoven, or Liszt, you express only your own emotion, you give only your own conception. It is your harmony with what the written notes suggest to you, but, nevertheless, it is wholly yours, just as this sketch will be yours, and would tell me, were I at a distance, and—I beg your pardon—did I know you well, what was the mood in which you painted it."

"Then an artist should have no moods?" I suggested, quite thoughtlessly.

"An artist should have as many moods as his great teacher, Nature, has. And where will you find them in one man?"

"You are rather unfair, I think," said I, stung a little by the cynical tone, though it was strangely thoughtful too. "May we not appreciate an imitation of Nature?"

"An imitation of Nature!" he said; and I fancied, by his voice, that he was smiling. "I stood here last night to watch the sunset. If any artist had put those colours on his canvas, the world would have cried, 'Unnatural!'"

"I always fancy," I said, it seeming so easy to me now to talk, "that no real artist can ever be perfectly happy, because never perfectly satisfied with his own work. Do you remember what an unhappy, unsatisfied life Turner's was?" I had been reading of him so lately, in this new quiet life of mine, that I was quite glad to have an opportunity of alluding to him.

"Yes; but I daresay he himself strikes the keynote when he says, 'Dad never praised me but once, and that was for saving a halfpenny.' There's a fine corner-stone for the raising of a man's life!"

Once more it struck me that the few casual words were full of a definite meaning, but it could only have been, I suppose, because this stranger's voice was so curiously intense.

"There have been many noble lives raised on just as ignoble a corner-stone," I said, and then stopped, feeling my cheeks grow red, and wondering over it, because all my life I had been so accustomed to chatting easily with gentlemen.

"But it's hard work," my companion answered, again in that

odd intense way, "and might almost tempt a man to look upon his life less as a gift than a necessity."

There was a little silence after he had spoken, for I did not know what to say; indeed, I caught myself insanely wishing (while I put quite the wrong green upon the bracken) that, like a girl in a book, I could know exactly what would be wise to say. But I did not, so, as I said, there was a little silence, and somehow that little silence seemed the most friendly bit of this queer interview. How odd that ever a minute's silence should seem to hold more than words could do!

When it was broken at last, I gave a visible start, and began outlining one of my clouds in a ruinous manner.

"You will come back and finish your sketch some day?" he asked me. "And, as I may again be here, I would like you to know whom you may meet. You guessed aright that I am an engineer, so I have only to tell you that my name is Graham Lockhart."

"Thank you," I said, beginning at once (though I scarcely knew why) to put up my paints. "I don't think my sketch will be worth finishing, though."

"It has too much sky," he said coolly, and even smiling a little as he took the block into his own hands. "I suppose, in the *Painting of the Future*, critics would call it a *cloudscape*. By the way, what sort of a poem does it suggest to you? You know Horace says a picture is a poem without words."

"Don't quiz it any more," I cried in sudden heat, as I took the block from his hand. "It is your fault that it is a raw, unfinished failure. And that is nonsense about a poem without words, for you may just as well say—say—that a poem is a picture without colour."

"Let us say so, then," he answered, composedly. "But in any case there is a poem that this spoiled sketch of yours suggests to me—a poem you cannot understand."

"Why do you think I cannot understand?" I asked, a little hurt.

"Because there can be no reason why you should. You are as unlikely to understand it as you are to know, in your idle, guarded life, what weariness means, or—loneliness."

"And do you think there can be no weariness without fatigue, and no loneliness in company?"

"You have learned the lesson too?" he asked, pausing before me, now that I had gathered all my property together and was ready to go.

I looked gravely up into his eyes and nodded. And it was then that for the first time I found myself able to glance fully and

critically into his face. A really cross face it seemed to me, and thin, and brown, and lined, and altogether ugly, with deep-set eyes, and tangled-looking light hair, not to mention one of those overhanging limp moustaches that would make me—if I were a man and wore one—tremble at the approach of soup. I had never liked men with fair hair and grey-blue eyes, especially when they were tall and lank, and might be any age.

"Will you make the remark aloud?" my companion asked me, just as debonairly as if he spoke about the weather. "I always admired the pluck of that young man who lives immortalised in poetry through his rather personal address to Father William."

"How could I possibly speak as he did?" I asked hotly, though I am sure the colour in my cheeks betrayed me. "Your hair is as thick as ever it can be, so how could I speak of 'the few locks.'"

"Those are not the opening words," he said; and then, for the first time, he laughed; very briefly, but in such a frank and irresistible way that I even laughed myself, though perfectly aware that it was something ridiculous in my own words or appearance that had provoked this glimpse of mirth in him.

I tried—I think it was for my own sake that I tried—to find something ungentlemanly in this swift, spontaneous laugh. I tried—while I said to myself that this was a common American face, haggard and worldworn—not to see that warm and steady light in the grey eyes, or that look of gentleness and power which gave me such a restless, indefinite longing to understand it. Indeed I tried *not* to understand it; and that was the easiest of all, because I had had so little to do with strong and solitary natures. I had never learned how often the strongest to endure are the most pitiful to forbear. I tried, as my eyes dropped from the tall, muscular figure, to say how gaunt it was, even reminding myself, with a smile, of Thomson's wolves, "bony, and gaunt, and grim." And then I tried to feel quite sure that this stranger had had no right to accost me here, much less to linger with me. A gentleman would never——

But it was of no use. My own instinct told me unmistakably not only that there had been nothing ungentlemanly in any word or act of this young engineer's (for young I knew that he must be, in spite of his worn, lined face), but that beyond all doubt he was a gentleman, let his labour be what it would. How could I feel any pride in being myself a gentlewoman, unless I knew these things by intuition?

What could it signify to me though, when of course I could never again voluntarily return to that spot while the men were busy on the line?

What an inartistic and unnatural little sketch that was of mine! I had it propped against my looking-glass as I prepared for bed, and I glanced at it very often in sheer amazement at my own stupidity. It was impossible it could suggest a poem to—any one; quite impossible. Now some of my sketches were really pretty good, but then, of course, it must chance to be this one that got criticised—fate was always so perverse; and no one who had seen this would ever believe that I could draw. I would not keep it, for it would only be a mortification to be every time I caught sight of it.

Once or twice I faltered over this determination, turning my eyes resolutely away from the sketch, and, in consequence, letting them rest above it on my own reflection in the looking-glass. At last I took the paper down, and chose a pencil, for I was very tired indeed of that gaze into the glass, because it made me study myself in quite a new way. How very little character or individuality there was in me! No one could ever describe me except with a series of *nots*. I was not distinctly tall, and not distinctly short; not really fair, not really dark; not fat at all, and yet not thin at all; I had no single charm to characterise me, no single real and honest ugliness to distinguish me. I had not the faintest claim to originality in any way, and, somehow, to-night I had rather a wish for an individuality of my own. Of course I should have done so before, only that the subject had not chanced to be brought definitely and distinctly to my mind before.

An hour afterwards I put, with a smile, my crude, unfinished sketch under lock and key.

"I will keep it for ever," I said now, "because it has Edgar's likeness there,"—for I had grown so tired of failing in my attempts to sketch a thin, bronzed face, with untidy hair, and bad temper glancing out of steadfast eyes; that, for a real relief and rest, I drew from memory the handsome, regular, happy face I loved best, and always had loved best, and always—"

CHAPTER VIII.

OFTEN now in our drives round Westerwood, Mrs. Luard and I came across the navvies at their work, and I liked to see them, and liked to watch the progress of the new line. But the old lady could not overcome her repugnance to the idea of cutting up the country so near her pretty home, and was always anxious to avoid even coming withinsight of the mea-

suring stakes. In merry allusion to this I took to calling the narrow, marked-out line "the trail of the serpent," and that amused her a little, though she never seemed to abate one atom of her aversion to the plan.

I never saw the engineer, after that spring day when I had so lamentably failed in my sketch, for fully three weeks, except three times. Once when I was driving home in the soft May gloaming, I passed him in the road as he strolled along with a stubby old meerschaum in his mouth and a little white terrier close at his heels; once Juno and I, cantering through the village, met him face to face walking quite comfortably beside two of his own men; and once, just as I was going out through the carriage-gates at Westerwood, he rode past on an unbroken-looking young horse, as black as an undertaker's, and with that same plebeian terrier in attendance. Neither time did he vouchsafe me a glance (that I know of), and certainly no courteous recognition of having seen me before, let alone of having talked with me for quite half an hour. The first time I thought it was natural, and more gentlemanly perhaps, than if he had claimed acquaintance ever so unobtrusively; the second time I was vexed, and thought it most absurd in him; but the third time I felt just as angry as ever I could feel—I mean of course as ever I could feel against an utter stranger whose acts concerned me so very little.

Mrs. Luard had never even yet chanced to see him, and I waited rather anxiously till she should do so, fancying she might then think it kind, and but natural, to proffer a little hospitality to the solitary American. But no wonder she had not seen him, when she so carefully avoided coming across that "trail of the serpent."

Surely I could feel now that spring was dying in summer's warm embrace; surely it might be truly said that summer was with us, and in the summer Edgar had said he would come to see me. I was dreaming, for the hundredth time, over his coming, as I sauntered one grey morning, my book unopened in my hand. Would he be changed at all? Should I be able to read in a moment, when I glanced into his face, whether the new life satisfied him utterly, and whether his wife's love was that which fulfils for ever the desire of a man's heart? Ah, yes, surely my anxious loving eyes would see and know without a word from him! My own joy would tell me in a moment of his; and no sorrow or regret of his would need to be told me in words. I thought so much of my brother that morning that, as I said, I never opened my book (though it was Hamerton's *All Round my Garden*, and the evening before I had enjoyed it so much), but went strolling on and on among the furze and heather, never

sitting down, as I am generally so lazily fond of doing. This was a new walk for me, and I should amuse my little old lady at dinner-time by making her recognise the places from my description. She was very fond of doing this, and of hearing me admire anything near her own valued home. I should tell her of the one fallen tree half across the shallow river up here, of the quarry I had passed under, and of that quaint wooden house just beyond which looked so very curious, with a tiny stable clinging to it, and those queer amateur awnings. Could it have grown there? Ah!

My step quickened so much that even my breath grew quick too, as I passed by the low, square house, with its painted walls and shutters, and its wide-open doors, for this must be where the railway engineer was living. Could there be a doubt of it, when that ugly little white terrier lay blinking on the grass before the doorway, and looked so ready to spring up and snarl at me? Why had I come this way at all? Yet I thought I had chosen so wisely, for was not this due north from Westerwood, while that other spot—the scene of my wretched sketch—was due south? I would not for the world have come if I had known. Of course I could not turn back just here—for how did I know that some one might not be watching me from one of those funny little windows?—but, when I had passed this exposed spot, I would turn aside and find my way home some other way.

So quickly had these few minutes changed the current of my thoughts that, in doing so, they had changed my saunter into a rapid walk. I was hurrying along now, only anxious to find my way into the highway, or some familiar lane, when suddenly the rain began to fall, in large, slow, heavy drops. I paused a moment, baffled and bewildered; not because I was afraid of a summer storm, nor because I dreaded spoiling anything I wore, for these white garden dresses, for which I had no need at Westerwood, quite wanted wearing out, and indeed my gipsy hat was tied down so compactly that it sheltered my face as nicely as any sunshade could have done. But it was because, unless I really rushed voluntarily into the possible peril of losing my way in the storm, I must go back past that curious wooden house which I had been trying to avoid.

I asked myself, again and again, why I had not, as soon as I had found where I was, turned back on the same road exactly? But what consolation are these insane questions we ask ourselves, in surprise at our own immense stupidity?

Holding my skirt snugly round me, with my book sheltered amongst its folds, I tried to win a temporary covert by running

along beside a stunted hedgerow, in which I could find no gate or gap. I daresay I had run only a few hundred yards, though it seemed to me just as if I had toiled and travelled in this growing rain for about twenty miles, when some one, running in a way that made my progress seem rather ridiculous, overtook and stopped me.

"This is all I have to offer you," a man's voice said; and before I had been able to look who it was, or had won breath enough to answer, I was literally hidden away in a shining white coat, down which I watched the water pour in streams, while some one buttoned it for me.

"There!" he said, standing upright again. "I have no umbrella, so the hat must go. It is a pretty hat, but easily replaced. Come."

"I am very much obliged to you," I said, with a feeble effort to stand upon my dignity, "for lending me this coat. It will keep me quite dry. I will send it back to you. This is my way home. It is not far."

No one knows how many more short and spasmodic sentences I might have indulged in, had my companion taken any notice of them; but they might have been left unsaid for any effect they had on him.

"Come," he said again. "The storm is not at its heaviest yet, so you will reach shelter in time to escape the worst."

"No, no, thank you," I answered, pausing most obstinately, as it struck me in a moment to what shelter he alluded. "I would rather go straight home."

"But I would rather you did not," he answered, in a tranquil, masterful way that made my heart beat with a passion as uncontrollable as it was brief, "and so would—all those who care for you. Try to keep up with me, please; the faster the better."

And so, wet and forlorn and vanquished, I walked beside him, feeling impotently angry with myself, and somehow far more impotently angry with him. I could not look at him—at least, I mean I could not look without his seeing that I did so—because of the tied-down brim of my hat, so I would not look at all; but yet somehow I seemed to know exactly the expression of his eyes under the narrow, bent brim of that queer white helmet he wore. And I knew he had no waterproof on himself.

It seemed to me only a few minutes before we reached the wooden house again. The door was closed now, but Mr. Lockhart hurried forward to open it, and lifted his hat a moment while he bade me enter. I did not draw back. I just glanced up at him as he stood uncovered, with the rain falling from his hair, and every grain of silly pride or doubt or hesitation

vanished. I did not know why, unless it was that at that moment the little that was not mean in me, was lifted high enough to recognise a higher nature.

"There is no one within to welcome you," he said, as he released me from the great mackintosh, "but you will not mind staying for a little time, I hope. I will send a man to your home at once, and, though you were so ungracious about coming here, I know you will be kind enough to make the best of it for a little time."

"I really don't know what I should have done," I said, looking round the funny little room with an air of being thoroughly at home in it, "if you had not so very fortunately found me in my distress, Mr. Lockhart—you see I remember your name. Mine is Eunice Compton."

"There is no need," Mr. Lockhart said, grimly, yet with a sort of troubled look upon my wet dress, "for you to feel compelled to introduce yourself to me just because I make you accept a rough shelter at my hands. Don't pay me in the current coin of your society. I would like to leave the debt uncanceled—for to-day."

"So I must, under any circumstances," I said, and then stopped, and looked down, half inclined to stroke that hideous little terrier, who sat upon his tail, so pert and upright, just in front of his master, looking first at me, then up into the wet sky, with a disapproving jerk of the head. "But debts are not unpleasant to me. I find I can live very comfortably under their burden."

As I spoke his face grew scarlet, and his eyes looked into mine with a strange, stern eagerness; but a moment afterwards he had turned them away with a laugh.

"I see," he said; "I understand what debts you mean. You cannot help contracting those. All others are as bad as—prison fetters. I am grateful to you," he went on, while I puzzled over his odd manner, "for looking so prettily at your ease in my—in this room of mine. It is always the intuition of a woman's nature to put us at our ease? Won't you take off your hat, and let me dry it? Or—you will dry it yourself? Yes, that is better; you will do it more daintily, and I—if you forgive me—am going to cook a little. Ah, it is good to see you laugh, but I wish your dress were drier!"

"It will soon be all right now," I said, and sat down by the fire, just as comfortably as if I belonged to the little wooden house, drying my hat and dress industriously, yet always (when I could) meeting, with a smile, Mr. Lockhart's anxious look at me, and answering laughingly his grave and rather cynical remarks.

"I am so unaccustomed to guests," he said, unaware, I fancy, of what a sadness there was in his tone, "that I feel something as poor old Trotty Veck did when he hung the kettle-lid behind the door, and put the baby's hat upon the kettle; do you remember?"

I was so glad! I was always glad to chat over Dickens's stories, but I was doubly glad that day, because I had been thrown so unmercifully upon the compassion of this stranger, and felt that he cared so little to be troubled to talk with me. Now it was all right, and we grew perfectly friendly, not only agreeing merrily, but also differing merrily, over the dear old characters we knew so well; while Mr. Lockhart gathered mysterious things about him, and, in a neat, deft way that was almost like a woman's (only quicker), he prepared a most fragrant pot of coffee, then cut thin slices of bread-and-butter, and spread us quite a dainty little meal.

"Please to try it," he said, handing me a cup of coffee, "and tell me honestly if I mastered the secret properly in America."

"It is delicious," I said, with an appreciative little nod, after sipping it; "did you learn to compound all American drinks as successfully as this?"

I forget what he answered—except that it was a merry negative—for I was saying in my mind,

"Then a beam of fun outbroke
On the bearded lips that spoke."

"Mr. Lockhart," I said, presently, while he sat opposite me by the open door, scarcely once touching his own coffee, "did you live—in America—the—the solitary sort of life that you live here; evidently now by choice?"

"By choice," he answered, quietly, "there as well as here. Are you going to recommend society to me—here?"

"I think," I began, as easily and bravely as I could, "that there are people in this neighbourhood whose society and acquaintance you would really enjoy; and even in the village——"

"I know the people of the village," he put in, with a slow, grave irony which literally seemed to hurt me. "I know the vicar and his children—of course if I know one I must needs know the others, as they are never apart, for I have often and often met them, walking two and two, like a small national school. I know the doctor's strong-minded wife, who says she might have been a celebrated doctor herself had not marriage 'crushed it out of her.' I know the shopkeeper's new old wife, and that Pepys would have said of her—'An ugly pusse, but brought him money.' I know the little mad watercress woman,

who thinks that she is the queen, and that her husband was a toad and haunts her still. I know the old cab-driver, who doesn't like the wife his son has chosen, and says such a fine young man ought not to have been taken in, because he had been 'about the world so much and seen so many sexes of girl.' And I know the landlord of the village inn, who scorns my men because they go so seldom to his tap-room."

"But even yet," I said, when my laugh was over, "you have not mentioned the whole even of the village society. Have you never heard of Westerwood and Mrs. Luard?"

"Mrs. Luard?" he questioned, rising from his easy position and putting his cup upon the table. "Who is she?"

I looked after him curiously, wondering over a new note in his voice. I suppose I wondered so much that I forgot to answer him; for in a minute he looked round again, and repeated, a little more slowly,

"Who is she?"

"Mrs. Luard is the owner of Westerwood. It is a very pretty place indeed. She is an old lady, and——"

"I hate old ladies."

The retort was so very discourteous that I looked in amazement at the speaker, feeling very angry indeed to see him look so cross.

"I suppose all men do," I said, indifferently and calmly. "It is well to know it in time. I shall be an old lady myself some day."

"Excuse me one moment," he cried, going out into the rain, and with his hands to his mouth uttering a long shrill whistle; then not returning to me until the man whom he thus summoned had come hurrying up to him.

"Take my horse, Elliot," he said, as they approached me, "as soon as the rain has abated, and ride wherever this young lady tells you, with any message she may wish to send. And, if there is anything you can bring her, bring her carefully; that is why I waited for you, and would not send one of the navvies."

"I'll go at once, sir," the young man answered; and I saw by his manner that he would do no bidding of Mr. Lockhart's grudgingly. "The rain doesn't signify."

"Then Miss Compton will give you directions," Mr. Lockhart said, and moved away quite out of hearing. Not only out of hearing, but quite out of sight too, I found, when I had given this young clerk, or whatever he was, a few pencilled lines to take to Westerwood. And it was a long ten minutes, I am sure, before he came back; just as wet as ever again, and running fast.

"I beg your pardon for my disappearance," he said, coolly taking up his old position; "but I feared Elliot might not have prepared for such a long absence, and that some damage might have been done before he returned."

"I have troubled you a great deal," I said; for I had grown quite depressed and humble during his absence. "Through my own idleness I have added greatly to your work."

"I like work," he said, with a steady brightness in his eyes. "I would rather wear out, as the old proverb says, than rust out."

"Would you?" I asked perversely. "I would rather rust out. It takes longer."

"I see you would," he said, with a really hearty laugh; and his eyes were warm and full of fun when they met mine. "And you would mightily enjoy being 'drawn in a Bath chair along to the grave.' Did you think me a long time away?"

That conclusion to his sentence was so abrupt and unexpected that no wonder it made my cheeks a little hot and uncomfortable, though of course I never thought of answering it at all seriously.

"You *were* long away. I might have run away with the coffee-pot, and never been discovered."

"I would soon have discovered—the coffee-pot," he answered. "I could run two miles to your half-mile, and I would have captured my treasure. Nothing you can say"—indeed I was not trying to say anything, so I do not know why he should have added that—"could convince me to the contrary. And I'm sure you yourself know I should have succeeded."

"You certainly would," I answered, quite willingly, though my face felt a little warm and unusual; "for I should have dropped the coffee-pot when I heard you, and run on. You would have found it quite easily and picked it up, and returned here with your treasure."

"And you?"

What a ridiculous question for him to add in that grave way!

"And I," I said, looking anxiously out to see whether the rain had abated, "should have missed my coffee."

"Have you enjoyed it at all, just ever so little?"

"I should like another cup," I said, looking lovingly at the table, and knowing this would convince him best; for his question had sounded very earnest; and could anything have been a greater pleasure to me than to see with what real pride and pleasure he poured me that second cupful, and sweetened it with such deliberation.

"I wonder," he said, when he brought it to me, and stood really enjoying the sight of my drinking it, "whether you could

ever fancy such a storm as this breaking and brightening a man's sky, instead of shrouding and darkening it. You are very kind for not, in my presence, watching impatiently for the carriage you expect. In that, as in several other things to day, you have shown not only a woman's tact, but a gentlewoman's most kind consideration. But of course I know you will be glad of your release. This must have been a tedious, wasted afternoon for you; and what can you know of any days among which such as this could shine with dazzling, lasting brightness?"

"I think the rain has ceased," I said, a little nervously, "but I am not at all delighted. You believe me, don't you?"

"Tell me what to believe," he said, speaking low, while his eyes were so steady and intent that my own grew grave and wistful as I answered. It seemed so impossible to say more than the very simplest truth, and that appeared so little.

"That I feel quite happy to be indebted to you, and shall never remember this afternoon as tedious or wasted, and—that I hope to meet you again."

"Thank you."

"You know I mean this?" I questioned, gravely and wistfully still, for how could I tell whether the great seriousness of his manner had not been ironical—and now in the distance I could hear a horse's step.

"I understand," he said, and for one moment firmly grasped the hand I offered him. "Your thanks are 'deeper than the lip,' and I would to heaven I were more worthy of them."

"Mr. Lockhart," I said, presently, as he helped me to put on the ulster which his messenger had brought me, "I don't think this shields me so well as your mackintosh did this afternoon."

"But it is far more comfortable, and suitable, and fashionable," he said, as he stroked down the little capes. "What a pretty tone of colour."

"Don't you think," I asked, rather pleased—for we women like even our cloaks to be admired—"that old Weller's great-coat must have been just such another, both in shade and make?"

"And size," he added, while he quizzically watched me tie on my hat, holding his own in his hand the while.

"I need not open that," I said, when he handed me the umbrella Mr. Elliot had brought me. "It was too late to save my hat."

"I will carry it, then," and he looked even relieved. "Now we shall have quite a pleasant walk, but I confess I rather dreaded that umbrella."

"Why?"

"I felt towards it just as the man felt towards the goose that was served at dinner for himself and his wife—it was all very well for one, but not enough for two. Leave the horse, Elliot; Stephen will see to him. I shall be down at the line in less than an hour, for I shall push back through the woods."

As he spoke he followed me from the house and closed the door behind us; and just then (just as we were both starting quite cheerfully) Mrs. Luard's pony-carriage was driven up close to us, and the pony pulled up by Mrs. Luard's own firm hand.

"As the ground is so wet," she said, greeting me with a smile, "I did not like you to walk. I had been in despair before I heard where you were. They told me a gentleman sent word. It was very kind of him. Is he here?"

As her eyes went on, beyond me, to the wooden house, I turned, stifling the little qualm with which I remembered I must drive now instead of walk. But in another instant I had forgotten all about my own passing disappointment. Mr. Lockhart was leaning against the door of his house, utterly motionless, with so cold and stern a face that he hardly seemed the same man who had left the house with me a few moments before. Utterly bewildered, I looked from him to the old lady, and at that moment she spoke to him—hurriedly, almost timidly, trying to thank him for his hospitality to her "young friend." But even this experienced old lady broke down in the face of such icy disdain, while I was lost in wonder how any man could with such intensity indeed "hate old ladies."

I bade good-bye to him without another glance, and took my place in the phaeton, all my heart wrathful against him. How dare he meet so sternly, and ignore so cruelly, the salutation of one who was old, as well as a lady? How dare he change in one moment so that I scarce could know him?

Yet, when we had left him behind us, in his strange, solitary house, my thoughts seemed different.

"He has been very kind to me," I said to Mrs. Luard, as we drove slowly on, and there was a queer catch in my voice.

"Has he?"

She was looking straight before her, her face pallid as I had never seen it before, her lips rigid. And, seeing this, I said no more, for any words of mine must have sounded mocking in her overwhelming emotion; and impertinent too in my utter ignorance of her trouble.

CHAPTER IX.

I HAD promised to play the service at the village church next day, so on this Saturday morning I sat at the window of Mrs. Luard's own little sitting-room, choosing the hymns and chants. I had tried every room in the house, but the heat was so intense that I could stay nowhere more than a few minutes at a time, and this was my last experiment. The old lady was sitting at her writing table, but not writing, and, though the light was diminished by the awnings outside the windows (for we could not bear the jalousies closed), I could see that she was fidgeted by something even more trying than the heat. It was nearly a month now since the day she had driven me from Mr. Lockhart's house, with that look of anger and distress upon her face; but, as she had never alluded to the day, nor mentioned his name, I did not. More than once since then we had met or passed him, and when he could not help it—I always noticed it was when he could not help it—he raised his hat to me; but he never betrayed the faintest recognition of Mrs. Luard, nor she of him.

"This want of rain is becoming a very serious matter, Eunice."

I looked at the old lady in surprise. Could it be that this question of the weather was all that was troubling her?

"Yes, so everyone says. Our hose from the river will be useless presently, for the river is wasting away—like ourselves."

"Like ourselves indeed," she echoed, laughing, as she tore the papers she had in her hand, threw them into her waste-paper basket, and left her davenport.

But I had been glad to hear the laugh, and felt relieved as I went back to my selecting of the hymns. It was a long process, but only because I felt so lazy and so languid over it. On any other day I should have trusted my memory with the numbers, but in this terrific heat I could carry nothing unnecessarily, even in my memory; so I leaned forward to the waste-paper basket, and took a bit of blank paper from the top. I had to write the numbers very small, but that was far better than having to get up and reach for a fresh sheet. When I slipped the memorandum into my hymn-book, I found that this scrap was one of the torn portions of a whole sheet, and so I tore it down in the crease, and threw back the half that was written on. But I had seen a line of writing—or rather half a line, without beginning or end, and below it

Gra

With all the other letters gone, I never doubted for a moment

that the signature had been "Graham Lockhart"; but I wished I had not seen even those few words—only three, except these broken ones where the paper had been torn—

Your wine would cho—

Gra

That was all, but even in the utter exhaustion of that terrible weather I would have done much to free myself from the haunting memory of those few words.

It seemed quite a relief to quit the house, though the village road was unshadowed, for I thought these worrying ideas would leave me in the church.

I met no one between Westerwood and the churchyard gate, save one or two women who came from their cabins to say good day to me, and to reiterate the universal wish for rain; but just as I opened the gate Mr. Lockhart came up from the opposite direction, and stopped to speak to me; at least he did not stop to speak to me exactly, but turned into the churchyard with me, and sauntered with me—I sauntered because there was no shadow here, and really I was not sure that the bellows-blower had arrived yet. I found it just as easy as possible to talk to him, in spite of that one glimpse I had caught, a month before, of a passion which had frightened me so, and in spite of those few savage haunting words which I knew that he had written. I am sure that we seemed quite old friends, as we rambled round the shadowy old churchyard up to the vestry door.

"That always seems to me such a pitiful appeal," Mr. Lockhart said, stopping before a leaning headstone I had often noticed, "*Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.* Did he want her back? Or did he mean that it had been the cry of the angels before she went? Anyway, it must have brought little consolation to him, and brings none to us who read it now."

"You have been here before then?" I said, looking up at him a little surprised, for I had never seen him within the church on any one Sunday, and so I thought he spent his Sundays elsewhere, and attended another church.

"Yes, I have been here often," he answered, lightly, "and within. Shall I prove it? There is a marble tablet in the chancel, erected to an Englishman called Dodge. The only words one can read from the nave are his name, and the text below—'*He is not dead.*' It strikes one very comically."

"I noticed it," I said, but never laughed. "Do you come to the services here?"

"Here?" he asked, with a quick frown, and yet his gaze seemed frank and honest as I met it. "No, it would be impossible for me to worship with——"

"It is well for us to worship with each other," I said, in his full, sudden, unconcealed pause, "and to leave all our pride without."

"But to take in our self-respect," he added promptly; "and the secret of all self-respect is in these words, 'To thine own self be true.'"

"I don't know," I answered, slowly; "self-respect is so difficult to define, and we have so little in us to respect."

"Miss Compton," said Mr. Lockhart, lingering still, with his hand upon the latch of the little vestry door, "the storm that overtook you in your rambling a month ago would be a priceless blessing to the country now, would it not? We should all value it now as only myself could value it then."

"This dryness of the earth must indeed be very bad for you," I said, without turning my face away, for he could never see the tiny blush.

"It is indeed, and worse for the farmers. But, beyond these considerations, how really sad it is to see the brown grass and the parched land longing for water! It is like watching a friend in fever. The river is nearly dry now," he added, after a pause. "You could cross easily any day. When will you come to try?"

I think he understood why I grew so red under his gaze, for he coloured a little too, though he spoke so lightly.

"You have not been for four whole weeks. Were you afraid of—more coffee?"

"It was delicious," I said, most readily.

"Then of what were you afraid?"

"Nothing."

"You are afraid now," he said, in a cool, almost stern way, "you are afraid of seeming unkind. Forgive me for detaining you."

I passed through the vestry door, when he opened it for me, and in another moment he had shut me in.

It was the heat, I think, but perhaps the hymns I had chosen were sad ones, for the tears came into my eyes in the strangest manner, though I strove against them, and talked now and then with the blower, to keep my thoughts upon what I did. But at last I was glad to dismiss him, and put my music up, for I had nearly broken the silence of the empty church by an uncontrollable sob.

I opened the vestry door with a childish longing to be at home, and locked it and gave the key to the boy who waited. Then I followed him down the churchyard path, and at the gate stood Mr. Lockhart, just as he had stood when he came up to meet me there an hour before.

"Good-bye," he said, offering me his hand as if we had been together all this time; and then I am afraid he saw I had been crying, for he gave my hand a closer clasp, and looked anxiously into my face.

"I suppose the shadows fall here and there upon every life," he said, "and, if we haven't troubles of our own, we fret perhaps for those of others. Miss Compton, if ever you think of me—not that I hope you will—please be quite sure that whatever I have done since I knew you, and wherever I have been, I have had two perfectly happy days. In all hard days to come I will remember these good ones; as, in these good ones the bad have been forgotten. I have said hard things, I know, scarcely fit for you to hear, except that such a nature as yours could never understand or be harmed by them; but here, in this quiet, sacred, spot, I can beg for your forgiveness with your farewell."

I had let my hand lie in his while he spoke, and so I hope he did not mind that I had so few words to say.

CHAPTER X.

THE terrific heat of the weather fully explains Edgar's postponement of his visit to me. It is pitiful to see the parched and thirsty earth, the withering trees and shrubs, and the brown, sickly grass. For still we have had no rain, and three weeks more have passed since Mr. Lockhart told me, at the churchyard gate, how the land thirsted like a man in fever, and how easy it would be to me to cross the river. Now its dry bed runs like a rough and pebbly hollow cut through the country. I had never seen him since that day, never once, and I was quite sure he avoided any chance of meeting me, just as strenuously as I avoided any spot where I could know with certainty that I should see him. I never to anyone now mentioned his name. I never, if I could help myself, allowed it to enter even into my thoughts. And I daresay that was the very reason why my heart began to beat so rapidly and painfully when Esther came upstairs to me that morning, and told me she had been sent to say a gentleman waited for me in the drawing-room.

I would not hesitate one moment to consider. I would not let my heart say, "This is Edgar—who else would seek me here?" I would not let it whisper one word to me, as I went quickly down the stairs and into the drawing-room, where the light was so carefully shut out for a moment I could scarcely tell who had come so eagerly to meet me with both hands extended.

"Eunice—dear Eunice! I am home again at last."

"Donald!" I cried. But, though I was so truly glad to see him again, I felt my heart grow still at once, and I knew it could not have been this old friend whom I had thought of meeting.

I tried to make him talk to me of his Indian life and sport, or even tell me of the changes he had found at home; but it was of no use. He would go back to the old story, and would only tell me that he had returned on purpose to appeal for a different answer from the one I had given him a year and a half before; seeking me here to plead in person.

"Please, please, don't ask me again, Donald," I said. "Nothing has changed for me—I mean none of my old feelings have changed."

"That is impossible," Donald said, in most legitimate contradiction. "All that influenced you then has been changed entirely. You could not tell me now that Edgar could not spare you. You have borne the separation that you feared. Oh, my dear," he cried, brokenly, "do not plead for another separation, a most bitter one for me! Surely you will let *some one* fill Edgar's place, and I have loved you so well and so long."

"So well, Donald," I said gently, "that I would sooner live all my life utterly alone than accept such love from you, for I have nothing to give you in return—nothing. I told you so long ago, Donald. Oh, I wish you had spared me this."

"It was only natural," he answered, speaking very slowly and stiffly in the great effort it was to him to speak at all, "that I should ask you again, now your old reason is shattered. But—there is some change in you, Eunice. I see it, but cannot understand it. It seems to me now that the 'No' you give me is a hundred times more cruel than the one you gave me last year."

"Cruel?" I echoed, shocked and grieved beyond all words to fancy I had been unkind to this true friend of ours—Edgar's and mine.

"Cruel," he said, seizing the hand I had involuntarily offered him, "because it holds no hope for me. It seems as if you had grown far from me since we met last, and—as if you knew it."

And then he broke down utterly—poor Donald!—and hid his face upon his hands.

"From such a true and faithful friend," I whispered, wistfully touching his bent head, "as you have been, Donald, I never, never could feel to have grown far away. I never felt it even when you were in India."

"And yet," he whispered, with a pitiful, girlish sob.

"And yet," I said, my own voice steady, though so quiet,

because I knew the truth was best to tell him now, "we never can grow nearer, Donald, never. We never can be more than such good friends as we have ever been—if you will let us be so still."

Ah, surely I need not tell anything more of that sad interview, until at last I went away, leaving Donald alone, while I bathed my eyes; then seeking Mrs. Luard, took her back with me. She was very pleasant and kind to this old friend of mine, and in her presence it grew easier to Donald to talk like his old self, and made me so grateful to her; because now I myself could fancy what his pain might be. And, as I was so selfish, this made it far, far sadder to me.

Mrs. Luard asked after my brother, and about my old home, just as she might have done if she had always known me, and we grew easy and at home together; yet I could see that there was, in her manner to-day, even an increase of that characteristic, half subdued, half hidden restlessness.

"Of course, Eunice," she said to me, seeing Donald tried in vain to take the luncheon that had been brought him, "we cannot allow Captain Ramsay to leave us to-day. His room is ready, and, as he has had a journey, we will dine at six instead of seven o'clock."

"I am very much obliged to you, Mrs. Luard," he said, in his quiet, courteous way, "but I believe that somewhere near here I am to find a friend I want to see, a Mr. Lockhart, whose acquaintance I made in India. I will go on and see him now, for I shall not stay in Ireland."

"Is he an engineer," Mrs. Luard asked, rising, and walking slowly towards the window, "and an American?"

The questions were asked quietly, but the ill-concealed scorn in those last three words baffled me.

"He is an engineer certainly," Donald answered, following Mrs. Luard to the window, as if glad to turn his eyes from me, "but I doubt his being an American, unless by naturalization. I will ask him."

"I propose," said the old lady, looking round upon me in the calmest way, and speaking as if she made a most natural and usual proposition, "that Captain Ramsay allow us to send and ask Mr. Lockhart to meet him here. We will mention what time we dine, and say we hope he will come; but the man need not wait for an answer, and he can say that, if Mr. Lockhart does not—does not come here, Captain Ramsay will go over after dinner. Shall I, Captain Ramsay?"

Donald thanked her of course, but I think, in my own mind, he would rather have gone away then, to escape that stroll round

the pretty Westerwood grounds alone with me. Yet I am glad to remember now that he said—when the dinner-bell surprised us—that no two hours had passed so quickly to him, since the dear old days in London. And they would have passed quickly to me too, I daresay, if I had not been so stupidly wondering—wondering. Just as if I should not, in any case, have known for certain in an hour or two!

When we came in sight of the house on our return, all Donald's depression returned.

"Eunice," he said, almost fiercely, "why did you keep me? Why did you let me stay? It will be worse than ever now."

"Will it? For my part, Donald, I shall like this time to remember."

"If you did, you would not send me away."

"Yes, I should. We could not spend our lives talking of old days. Donald, you are quite sure Edgar and his wife seem perfectly happy?"

"Why should they not be?" he questioned, hastily. "You seem to have strange doubts about married life, Eunice."

And I did not ask again, for I had noticed that each time I had asked it he had parried that question.

What a strange, uncomfortable dinner that was! Yet I am sure not one of us could have defined its strangeness, or told wherein lay its discomfort. Mr. Lockhart had not appeared; but that did not really signify to either of us, and we were all able and willing to talk, and all trying to do it to the best of our ability, each one feeling it a special duty evidently—Mrs. Luard as hostess, Donald as sole guest, and I (doubly so) as the sad cause of his coming. Still the dinner, though one of Mrs. Luard's perfect little dinners, dragged unaccountably, and it was, I know, a relief to us all when we could consider it at an end.

"You shall be driven over, Captain Ramsay," Mrs. Luard said, seeing that he left the dining-room with us. "You will have the more time with your friends and until we have had rain there will be no pleasure in a walk."

"This need of rain is growing serious," Donald said, while we waited for the carriage; just as if it were a fresh subject of conversation, though again and again through that long dinner our conversation had fallen back upon the well-worn topics of the heat and drought. "They told me at the junction that there had been a fire along the railway-bank. A spark from the engine had ignited the scorched grass, and they spoke of its being more dangerous, because near the wood, and to the northward there is a stretch of furze and bracken, unbroken for several miles."

"Yes," I said, and did not tell him it was there that he would

find his friend, being very glad indeed to see the carriage driving up just then to take him.

Yet the very instant he was gone—so utterly perverse we women are, just as Edgar used to say—I wished that the time were come for his return, and that he were telling us all was right on that wide, arid heath.

“Eunice dear!”

The old lady’s voice, gentle as it was, made me join her with a pang of self-reproach, for I had lingered out in the heavy night-air alone, and had forgotten that she was lonely too, and might feel just as restless as myself, and just as ill at ease. The lamps were lighted when she and I re-entered the drawing-room together, and tea was on the table, so I drew a long breath of relief, and tried to make it more cheerful for us both. But I could not play, not once all the evening, though she asked me. I believe I could not have helped shrieking at the first sound of the notes. And yet how absurd it all was, when we were leading just our customary, unruffled, easy life—we two women—and ought to be grateful for it! Who can ever explain such whims as these?

When Donald came back at last, it seemed to me as if it ought to be midnight; but I suppose he was really earlier than Mrs. Luard expected him to be, for she feared he had felt needlessly unwilling to keep her horses out.

“And, besides that,” returned Donald, honestly, “Lockhart seemed by no means well; knocked up indeed, and needing a rest.”

“The heat, I suppose?” I suggested, as I prepared a glass of negus for Donald.

“The heat beyond a doubt,” he assented, as he stood watching me. “though there is prospect of a breeze. Dear me, Lockhart looked to night when I left him quite a worn-out man, and yet, when I went first, and found him at his work, what a spirit there was in every word he said, and what a vigour in his calm authority over those men! Eunice dear, I am sadly afraid I have kept you up too long. You look the very colour of the white rose in your dress.”

“Query, is there any colour in a white rose, Mrs. Luard?” said I, smiling rather imbecilely, I am sure, and bidding good night in that same breath.

How good it was to be alone at last in my own room, with hours of solitude before me! How good not to be obliged to laugh, or talk, or listen! How good to be able to look out upon the quiet summer night, unquestioned!

* * * *

I do not know how long afterwards it was—how could I ever

know?—that the peaceful, sleeping household was awakened by my cry, and that I (with shaking hands, scarce knowing what I did), covered my white dress with my summer waterproof, tying the hood round my face, while—creeping backwards from the window—my eyes were strained and burning in their gaze upon that flame which coiled and crept along the distant hearth.

“What is it?”

The question was whispered affrightedly by Mrs. Luard, when I met her outside my door, seeing she too had not been in bed or undressed; but I only echoed it a moment afterwards, for, as I hurried downstairs, I saw Donald coming in through the hall door.

“I cannot tell exactly, dear,” he said, trying not to show me any alarm or excitement—poor Donald!—“but something has caught fire, and the breeze, just risen, is taking the flame direct across the moor.”

“Northward?”

“Yes, due north. Oh, Eunice dear, don’t look so terror-stricken, or I cannot leave you. Yet I want to go, for I may help.”

“I’m going too,” I said, quite steadily, and even smiling at the word Donald had applied to me. “I am not terror-stricken; but I must go.”

“Impossible!” cried Donald, hotly. “Remember the horses would not stir in their panic at the fire. I must walk, but it is impossible for you.”

“You go then, Donald,” I said, shrinking back against the wall, and trying to turn my face from him, lest he should read my new determination. “I will not keep you. Oh, make haste, that you may help if help is needed!”

I stood back in the shadow, perfectly still, so long as I thought Donald might be within earshot; and while I did so Mrs. Luard left me for a few minutes, and came silently and swiftly back.

“I am ready,” she said, in a pleading whisper. “I must go with you, Eunice.”

I looked at her in my great surprise, but one glance into her face told me she was ready, as I was, and that if I went she must go too, or I should be most cruel. Quite mechanically I folded a little more closely around her the black shawl she had thrown over her black evening dress, and then I put her hand within my arm, and clasped it for a moment, as if in a mute way telling her to take courage. Then we started, for Donald would walk rapidly I knew, even if he did not run, and he could scarcely hear a footstep following now.

But the very minute we left the house, Mrs. Luard was seized with such a fit of trembling that I, in all my impatient

longing to be gone, could only plead with her to let me take her back. She stopped me in pitiful, eager haste, and I felt it was kindest to be silent, only helping her all I could. So we went on in the summer darkness; darkness except when it was cut for a moment by that distant light which rose and fell almost like languid summer lightning; while we seemed so far away from it—as yet. But soon we should come out upon the brown and thirsty heather, where I knew the fire had been before us.

“Hurry!”

I said the word in an awfully eager whisper, as I looked appealingly down upon the terrified old lady, whose weight I nearly supported. She came bravely on, her hands locked tightly round my arm, her lips set rigidly together, her eyes looking wildly before her, and a shudder running through her feeble frame every time a startled bird flew near us, or (terrified at our approach) rose with a cry from the bushes where it had hidden from the flame.

We crossed the dry bed of the river without noticing it, while a cloud of smoke came from the belt of coppice opposite and almost drove us back. Then it was that my feet faltered for the first time, but I think it was only in anxiety for my weak companion, for I thought that she must break down here. But when I drew back before the smoke, and said aloud that we must try another way, she bravely refused to listen, and drew me on; still without a word, and still with no tears in her wide eyes. When we left the trees, and came out upon the open line of moor, I felt her weight grow terribly heavy upon my arm, and it needed all the strength I had to keep her from falling; for at that moment the flame rose with one dying leap against the sky. Then I knew that, after its hungry chase among the heath and bracken, it had found something more worthy of its furious appetite, and that now its last most cruel revel was over, for—there had stood the wooden house.

I started back, for my knees were tottering under me, and I was afraid of falling too; but it was only for an instant, I think. Over the burnt bracken, while the smoke seemed stifling us, and the dying birds chirped horribly about our feet, we went on, until there came a figure running towards us, from where that distant flame had waned and faded its fierceness.

I stopped the man, running to bar his way, but Mrs. Luard clung to me still, and ran with me.

“Is it—the house?” I asked, each word an agony to me.

“Yes. Good Heaven! Is it Miss Eunice and——”

I stopped the man before he had shown he had recognised Mrs.

Luard, for this was my own groom, who must have gone with Donald, and now been sent for aid.

"It was all over so quickly, miss," he went on, in evident haste to pass. "We saw it blazing just as we came in sight, Captain Ramsay and me, and of course, it being all wood and so dry, it just seemed all done in a minute."

"And the—the owner of the house?"

It was Mrs. Luard's question, but it startled me as well as the man, the forced voice was so unfamiliar to me.

"He was asleep in bed, miss, and no one could get to him till it was too late. I'm going now for Dr. Saunders 'cause he ought to be by when they move——"

I dismissed the man with a sign. My throat was like a burning coal, and I could not have formed a word to save my life. When I turned—dazed and blind—to go upon my way gropingly, Mrs. Luard seized me with strong, hot hands, and pulled me on, as if her strength had suddenly grown more than human.

"Too late!" she cried, in raised, frenzied tones. "You heard what he said, and it is true—true! Some would say it cannot be, that God is too pitiful; but it is only justice—only justice. We were near yesterday, and yet the whole world might have been between us; now—heaven itself is not farther from me than he is, my son—my son!"

With a strange trembling compassion—a touch of that compassion which always gives a woman her greatest strength—I put my arms about the feeble, shivering form, and kissed the shaking lips; but she pushed me from her almost fiercely, with one gasping sob.

"Loose me!" she cried, her wild eyes clinging to the lurid, dying light. "What right have I with tender womanly ways? Where were mine? Yet what are you, while I was—his mother? Why don't you shriek when I tell you this? I have often wondered how—if you knew—— Come! come! We creep along, and you hold me back. Surely now we need not be so far apart, he and I—he and I! Don't hold me back. Come! come Eunice,"—her voice had changed to a swift, intense whisper, while we still hurried on, as we were doing all the while she had spoken of our creeping—"Eunice, you never guessed—never. Why didn't you? Why didn't you see it all? It was so plain to see. It was his father's fault—at first; only at first. It was all mine afterwards; all mine. He thought it no wrong. He knew the crash was coming, and he made the home safe—the home I loved, and was proud of—and all that it contained, all that fed my pride and my self-indulgence. My husband did it, and I thought it no wrong; at least I—I tried to think it no wrong, till

—Graham told me. Graham told me how the money had been gathered, and was not ours to use, and how we had used it, knowing this; and how there was but one name, he said, for—for such an act as his father's—or mine! How that word used to echo in my ears sometimes in the silence—just as he said it—sadly, for all his scorn, when he begged me to let him make me a home by his own work, and I would not. That was before—he went. Eunice, come, come! How slow you are! He went then—can you hear me? He would not touch, he said, this money that I—I kept. He would not sleep one night in this house that was not ours—to which we had no more right, he said, than the lowest of our servants, and not so much. So he said, Eunice, before I, by my own sin, exiled him. He—he had but a dark inheritance to take, he said, and—he should leave his dishonoured name with me, and—make his own. Eunice,” she went on, after a pause, her words still feverish and rapid, “how terribly I realized all this on that day—you remember? Oh! you remember, for I saw your eyes just then, when—when you caught the look he gave me—gave his mother, in his proud disdain of her. That day, Eunice, I realised how far apart we were, and—since then I have often seen him at his work, when he has not seen me, or—has not noticed me in his contempt; and sometimes I have felt afraid of you. I have fancied you knew all—could read it in my face. And now——”

“Hush!” I pleaded, my whole heart stirred within me, as we neared the ruined house. “Oh! hush! until we know——”

But a shriek silenced me. A shriek so piercing in its terror and despair that it will be years before it ceases to come back to me in troubled sleep. Mrs. Luard drew herself from my detaining hand, and, groping her way among the ruins of the little house, fell to the ground beside *something* which lay on a small iron bedstead covered from our sight. And beside this hidden form she knelt, moaning pitifully—ah, so pitifully!—for a word of forgiveness.

I heard each broken, anguished word, keenly and painfully as if they were the utterances of my own anguish too, but I looked at nothing save the stricken mother's form. I thought of nothing save the mother's penitence and too late humility. If I had thought of other things—if I had remembered my own self—I could not, even with that hard grip upon the footrail lest I too might fall, have given her just the faint, faint comfort of feeling me near her, and hearing my few senseless, tender words.

“My dear,” I said, forgetting all about her age and independence, as I softly stroked the bowed grey head, “stand here by me. Lean on me as you will, for if a stranger sees you—There is some one.”

She lifted her head mechanically, and at that moment Donald Ramsay came in sight, his face, when he saw me, growing drawn and strange in the uncertain light.

"I am not fainting. I am quite well." So I whispered to him, eagerly, as I refused his help, and letting go my firm grip now, and rising upright, I pushed the hair from my face and looked at him. His coming was so merciful, but not for me. I was well and strong, and had no share in the great sorrow of this night. It was not *my* heart that was breaking; not *my* life that lay in the ashes of this fire. They were not my sobs—were they?

"Eunice! Eunice darling, let me take you home. This is most terrible of all—to see you so."

"Not me"—but it was as if some one else uttered the words close to my ears. "What is it all to me? Oh, Donald, Donald, lift her up and comfort her; she was——"

"I will take her away," said Donald, with strange, slow quietness. "I will do all I can for her. But her face frightens me, Eunice. Close your eyes, my dear. What is it you are struggling against? Your face is full of suffering, yet you say——"

"It has frightened me; this night has frightened me, that's all," I whispered back to him, with what I had meant to be a smile, though I saw it made him start, and draw his hand across his eyes, as if they too were growing wide and aching like my own. "There is nothing you can do for me, only for her. Oh, Donald, comfort her; she was his mother."

"Whose mother, Eunice?"

"I see," he went on, hurriedly following my swift, pained glance, and then taking my hands with a new protecting tenderness. "Eunice, my dear, how you have felt for her! But——"

I heard no other word. My eyes had gone beyond him, and beyond the mother's crouching figure, and were fixed on some one coming slowly towards us, from where the wavering gleam of light was strongest—some one whom, I think, if there had been no light at all, I should have known to be Graham Lockhart.

CHAPTER XI.

I CANNOT tell of those first few minutes, when the mother, with a sob of joy, rose and stood face to face with her living son. Even now, when I recall it, my eyes swim in their tears, and I try to forget, for it was more pitiful to see her great emotion than to see his stern, strong self-restraint.

"This has been a shock for you," he said, in a strange, pausing way, as he looked down upon the bed, yet never touched his mother's outstretched hand. "Poor fellow! he had said he would wait up for my return to-night, but sleep overcame him, I suppose, and he must have thrown himself upon my bed and slept—to his death. I have been away for hours—ever since you left me, Ramsay. I fancied a walk would do me more good than the rest that you advised; walking generally does. The fire overtook me, and I turned and fought my way through it, trying to save—I was in time to do a little—farther up the line, but from the first it must have been too late to reach this poor fellow, if he had only kept awake! But it was swift and sudden; there is the mercy."

"And you yourself?" cried Donald, in a troubled voice. "Great Heaven, Lockhart, what can we do for you?"

Then for the first time his mother seemed to see all I had seen—the blackened, suffering face, the burnt dress and disabled arm, and (worst of all) that stern and terrible control he put upon himself.

"Graham," she wailed, "come home with me, my dear, my son! Come home with me!"

Ah, so well I seemed to know just what she must be suffering—she, his mother!—yet as he stood there, defying his pain, and stern in his anguish, all the misery in the room seemed to be *his*.

"Come with us Graham," she pleaded, her shaking hands outstretched. "Let the past die. It was your father's doing."

"He is dead. It is only the living who can make restitution—or——"

I, watching him, saw that he stopped in sudden faintness, but conquered it by a great effort, and turned and looked out into the night.

"Forgive your mother, Graham," the old lady entreated, following him, her voice almost failing her, in her alarm and anxiety. "It is so terrible to see you so, and here. Come home with me."

"Never!"

The single word was strong and fierce, and I started back as if a pistol-shot had been fired among us.

"Eunice," the mother moaned, "plead for me. It is only to me he will not listen. Pray him to come home with—us."

"Eunice, don't speak to me," he said, never thinking to call me otherwise, in his intense and angry earnestness; and the suffering in his face that moment, when he looked at me, was beyond words, and made Donald move as if to hide me from him. "It is terrible enough to *see* you here, but if you speak to me I shall—go mad! Take her away, Ramsay! You seem to have the—right to do it."

I fancied I must be feeling as the dying feel when they cannot form the words they long to say to those who wait and watch speechlessly for the last farewell, for I could say no word. I only moved a little farther from Donald's side, and nearer Mrs. Luard's. It was only to her I could offer help and sympathy to-night.

"Oh, Graham, you are so ill!" she cried, wringing her hands, as he moved unsteadily, seeking a support. "Come with me. You are so solitary here, so—so friendless; and—and there has never been comfort for you, or ease, or enjoyment."

"I could have neither in your house—or what you call your home."

"But you will come now, Graham. Where else," she added, in a new hurrying tone, for there was the sound of wheels near, "where else could you go—to-night?"

"You have no need to be troubled," he answered. "The men will see to that."

"They shall not!" she cried, raising her locked hands. "You shall come; and presently, when you are well, it shall go—the home I've been so fond of—and I will make restitution. Why not?" she sobbed, her voice dropping again as a carriage stopped at the door. "I've never been happy there, never at ease since you left me, Graham, I have thought of you always, always. Oh, my lost son!"

But I am sure he did not hear her, and I think the whole scene was fading from his sight, as (groping as it were for Dr. Saunders' hand) he spoke in a dazed, bewildered way.

"That poor fellow is beyond your help. There is one navvy hurt. I wasn't in time. It is not much."

"But you yourself?" cried the physician, looking astonished at him.

"I am hurt—a little. They will take me to—the hotel. Nowhere else. Nowhere else!"

"To Westerwood," whispered Mrs. Luard, with a pleading touch upon the doctor's arm; "bid him go there."

But then I spoke. I could not help it, for Mr. Lockhart was unconscious of our voices now,

"Not to Westerwood," I said—and somehow there seemed an authority in my quiet voice. "To the hotel, please. Mrs. Luard will see about everything else."

"My carriage shall take you ladies home first," said Dr. Saunders, seeming half bewildered, whilst he began to cut Mr. Lockhart's sleeve, and Donald brought in the carriage cushions for an impromptu couch. "I must see to the burns before we move, and the carriage will be back in time for us. Westerwood

isn't far by the road. Now, Mrs. Luard, make haste if you please."

I knew we should pass the village inn on our way to Westerwood, and I asked Dr. Saunders' man to hasten there, that we might stop and have the room prepared, and then we could walk home. Even if Mrs. Luard wished to stay, as I fancied she would, I could walk home in the dawn alone.

So, from the inn, we sent the carriage back in haste, while I gave the orders as clearly as I could to the landlady, who had been up and busy ever since the alarm of fire had run through the village.

"Eunice," said my poor old lady, an hour afterwards, coming from her son's quiet room, with a reflection in her eyes of all his suffering (yet, though her face was lined and swollen with her weeping, it had a charm it never had before), "you will go back without me. I shall not leave him again—never leave him again unless he bids me, and he would only bid me if I were—there—I mean if I still claimed what is not—what never was my own. Dear little friend, forgive me for bringing you to the home I had no—no right to. You will forgive me that I take it from you soon—as soon as I can. Yes, I know you will, for you would hate such an act as gave it me, and such dishonesty—he called it so—as mine for keeping it. I have been very fond of it, Eunice, and I loved it better still when you came to share it; but perhaps I have been more proud than fond; and now all that seems dead, and my only longings is to make amends, and to keep—my son."

"Tell me," I said, kissing her as I could almost fancy kissing my own mother, "what I can do in this, for it will make me happy too."

"Heaven bless you, dear!" she said, her weak voice choked with tears. I should have written—by Graham's bedside—when my eyes were fit—to my lawyer—to come."

"I will do it," I said, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. "I shall be glad to do it. I shall want something to do. He will have to see you, of course, but all I can do——"

"Will he?" she questioned, wistfully. "Could not you tell him, Eunice? I—I would like no mention of it here—where Graham is. Tell him I will sell all—all. I will give up my income, and everyone of my husband's creditors shall be paid. He will need my signature, perhaps, but surely nothing else, for my mind cannot change. Tell him to save nothing for me, and if he asks where and how I am going to live—for he is old, and may think it is hard for the old to make or find new homes—just tell him I shall have all I want in my boy's forgiveness. Nothing else

seems worth anything to me now, except his love—and that may come at last. It may come."

"It will," I said folding my arms about the little trembling form, "and it is love worth waiting for."

"Ah, yes," she said, laying her cheek wistfully to mine, "and I have been long without it—wearily long! Good-bye, dear little friend. Good-bye. You will come again, and I shall not be so—weak again. I feel very old to-night, Eunice, and—so weak."

Weak! Why, there was such a steadfast courage in the dim and swollen eyes that I could scarcely bear to meet their gaze!

It was still only morning when Donald drove me into the town, and I sent two telegrams—one summoning Mrs. Luard's lawyer from Dublin, and asking him to arrange for an absence of two days; the other begging my brother to come over to me at once.

CHAPTER XII.

THREE weeks had passed, and for the first time Graham Luard was to leave his room, and be driven slowly for a little in the October sunshine; while they ventured to speak now of a possible return to his old work, for which another engineer had been summoned. Only once—once while he lay unconscious, and they watched and feared he must die—had I seen him since that terrible night of the fire, though I had spent so many, many troubled hours in the old inn, unknown to him; often even unknown to his mother, because she so seldom left his room and came into her own to find me there. She had been always with him; always untiring, and prompt, and wakeful; always bright, and brave, and patient. Even when she told me that in his unconscious hours he would often call me, or speak to me as if I were with him—never calling her, never wanting her—she added, very patiently, that it would come at last; for what had she ever done to make him want her—yet? Sometimes she had wished to take me to him, but Dr. Saunders said it was possible he might know me, and then there would be an excitement which might prove fatal. So the three weeks had passed, and now for the first time I was going to be with him for a little while.

He knew now—just as his mother knew—that Westewood was sold, that her income was forfeited, and that the heavy debts his father left were all paid. He knew, as his mother did, that not one of the luxuries or comforts in which she had taken such

delight and pride, had been reserved by her; that by her wish (distinctly uttered and bravely carried out) she had left herself homeless and penniless, to clear the dark shadow from her husband's name. And now no gaunt spectre—with the ugly name which Graham himself had given it—stood between his mother and himself. I saw this when they came to me in the inn parlour, and I saw too that—like his mother again in this—he felt that I had been aiding a little in this deed of restoration. As if I could have helped it! I had so many idle hours at Westerwood that any work was a real blessing to me; while Mrs. Luard had no leisure time at all, and a great tax upon her strength. But I liked to hear him thank me, however little I deserved it. It was far, far better than talking—as his mother had begun to do—of how soon I should be leaving them, and of how she dreaded the parting, and dared only think of it as such a much-to-be-desired change for me.

"You never speak of it, Eunice," she said that morning, while we drove slowly through the village, "because you are too kind. But, my dear, I must be selfish indeed, if I could go on tempting you to stay with me—now."

"As our parting is so near, Mrs. Luard," I said—this was the first time I had mentioned it, and I was determined not to let my voice falter, so I never looked into Graham's face, so worn and wan, and yet with so much of its old power still—"will you do me just one favour? Westerwood is still vacant, so will you let us drive there now, for a last look? I find that I grew fond of the house almost as you did, and I would so like—when I have gone away—to remember that we had been there just once—all three of us together."

She was looking with wistful interrogation into her son's face, but he leaned forward and laid one hand gently upon mine. Even three weeks of idleness had not made his nervous hand white.

"Why should you beg for this so shyly and so timidly? Your own true heart has told you what we all should like, unless—Will there be any sorrow to you, mother, in seeing the old home that has been so dear to you—knowing it is yours no longer?"

To me, as well as to her son, the look she gave him was sufficient answer.

How peaceful and how beautiful Westerwood looked in the sweet autumn sunshine! How calm, and like a very dream of home! And within, how soothing and complete and pretty!

"Graham," I said, with a ridiculous catch in my voice, as he stood looking dumbly round the pleasant rooms that once had

been home indeed to him, "life would be easier here than in the village inn, or——" I never finished the sentence, I am thankful to say, nor made any allusion to that little wooden house of his beside the railway-line.

"Yet," he said, and his gaze went warmly to his mother's face as she sat beside the window, fancying perhaps that her tears would not fall if she looked out and far away, "you do not repent the change, my mother?"

"Graham, I would not give the last three weeks, if for that price this might all be mine again," she said. "Yet I cannot help these tears. Don't mind them, dear. I don't think they are all of sorrow."

I fancied I knew why he turned his eyes away, and stood looking out among the brave October roses. Then I went to his mother's side, and knelt beside her.

"Will you," I said, my hands clasped in her lap, and all my heart seeming to come into my eyes, I was so very much in earnest, "tell Graham this? Will you tell him that I came here when I had no prospect of happiness in any other home, and—that I found it here? Will you tell him that I had known no mother, till I found one—here? Will you tell him that my own brother, who was everything to me for all my life, is not dearer to me now than the brother who is—here? And—and will you tell him that though I came to you so solitary, and longing so for friends, and for love—oh hush, please! It is true. However assured or independent you may have thought me then, my heart was longing always for a mother's love—I was not poor in any other way. I had money—a good deal—and I never knew what to do with it. But now—now I am rich in other ways—better ways—and, oh, what pleasure could there be so great to me as this that I have done? Mother—let me call you mother just this day—take from my hand—as my gift—the home that you have loved so well, and where you welcomed me when I—was lonely."

Oh, Graham, Graham, shall I ever forget that little murmured prayer of yours, when you held me in your dear, dear arms that day, while I so silly and so weak after all, cried for very joy, because you were both so happy?

No wonder Edgar—when he came next day to take me ho—no, Westerwood was home even then, to stay with him until Graham should come for me—laughed to see how I was changed since, three weeks before, he had come over to arrange my purchase for me, and was so vexed that I had let him—as well as Donald—leave me alone at Westerwood. But Graham did not laugh.

He only, in his earnest way, begged Edgar to take care of me, because I had had a troubled lonely time, for which he was to blame.

I would not let Edgar listen to any more.

"Even that wonderful present that you gave my mother, Eunice," Graham said, when there was only me left for him to talk to, "is nothing to the gift that you have given me. Oh, love, how long the days will seem till I may come to claim it!"

"Through all our lives you will be patient with me, Graham? For you have all the strength and courage, and I am such a shallow girl."

"Love, for such shallowness——"

But, if I wrote what Graham said, I should have to write, too, how I looked up and kissed him, quite of my own free will, and then was a little frightened, through that intense and silent embrace of his, because it seemed to herald such a long, long parting.

But I need not have feared. If, as he said, the days seemed long before he came to claim me, he did not allow them to be many. Before I had even chosen my wedding-dress, he came. Some of my old friends told me, forbearingly and regretfully, that he was ugly, but I only laughed. I, too, had once thought him ugly; or tried to think him so; while now beside him all other men seemed—— What a silly thing I was just going to say!

A SHADOW ON THE THRESHOLD.



CHAPTER I.

THE little boys have just started off to school, Dolf carrying the bag of school-books, and Stevie a little parcel of my seed-cake for their luncheon; and I, still standing at the shop-door, where I always wait for their last nod and smile, feel my eyes fill with tears. Though I sat up so late last night mending their coats, though I brushed their caps so carefully, and though I made their little frayed collars as white as hands could make them, my little brothers still look very, very poor. And I cannot help it. Those who are poor know how impossible it is to look otherwise, even with all care, and will understand how, though I try so hard (and have tried for all the seven years since our mother died), we all still look—what we are—very, very poor.

My little brothers are at the corner of the street now; they turn, with their last smile, and in another moment they are out of sight. I go in from the door, and wipe my eyes, and begin to dust the books in the shop; and presently I find myself actually singing over the task; for, after all, poverty is not sickness or death, and, indeed, singing comes more naturally to me even yet than crying.

I polish the glass case (very carefully for fear of the cracked panes giving way), and display to the greatest advantage the few little prints and showy articles which we possess. I make the brightest books conspicuous, and put the faded ones into the background. Then I change the places of the prints and periodicals in the window, that the stationer opposite (whose books and pictures are constantly renewed) may imagine that we sometimes replenish our stock. And, while I am busy, the old, sad thoughts lie only half hidden under those passing fancies I try so hard to hold.

“How hard it is to pay our way from day to day! How long

shall we be able to do it? How long, above all, will my dear old father——”

I stifle that thought, and go back to my singing, while I put my duster away in its drawer, and rule and date the day-book.

This is Thursday, and only six shillings and tenpence have been taken through the week. I make a rapid mental calculation—rent for house and shop; gas, which must be burned all the evening in the shop, whether customers come in or not; coal; taxes; food for six people, three of whom are hungry, growing children; clothing for us all; the stock to keep up; the school-bills to meet; and a few poor to help, to whom our mother used to be kind, and whom she begged us never to forget. And against all this, six shillings and tenpence taken in three days!

In the few moments of silence, while my head is still bent over the day-book, and I am vainly trying to feel strong and ready for whatever may happen, some one, whose step I know, comes into the shop. Yet I do not raise my head; no, not though my heart is beating with a love which in its great intensity amounts to pain, because it is a love which has never yet gone hand in hand with hope. Gently, though by hands that are used to work, my head is lifted; then, while my eyes grow hot and troubled under the long gaze that holds them (so tender, so longing, so unutterably sad!) a cry escapes my lips involuntarily, for I know now that this is to be our good-bye, Philip's and mine. Still it is long before I can even whisper his name, to disturb this silence which seems so full of heartache for us both; but for the first time in his life he does not answer me. Then, as I cannot bear that yearning gaze of his any longer, I draw my face away and cover it. And when at last he breaks this miserable silence of his, leaning on the counter with his head in his hands in a weary, spiritless way, I hardly recognise the heavy voice as his.

“Jennie, say good-bye to me, and let me go.”

“Not a last good-bye—oh, not a last good-bye!” I falter.

“Why not?” he questions, moodily, but his face is so full of misery, the handsome, honest face that I have seen so happy and content. “Why not? Are these such pleasant interviews that we should multiply them? Is it manly for me to come and make your hard life harder by letting you witness—beyond your own—my poverty and my despair?”

“They are my poverty and my despair too,” I say, very timidly, “and I cannot bear them without you.”

“I want a heart of iron to fight my way from this humiliation,” he goes on, still in that unfamiliar tone; “and when I am with you I grow weak and trembling like a woman. I—will not come again.”

"If I thought you meant it, Philip," I say with a smile—a real smile, for could I pretend anything in the face of his intense earnestness?—"I would help you to go away. I would even ask you never to come again, if I thought I really made you weak. So you shall think it over, and tell me exactly what you think, next time you come."

"Next time," he echoes, but the unfamiliar bitterness has almost vanished from his tone now, and the old, warm, loving look comes back into his eyes, as he takes my hand in his and kisses me. "Next time, Jeanie!" Very well, there shall be one more. I had meant this to be the last. I had meant to put a hundred miles to-day between myself and you, but your own words are always best. And what a respite it seems! Isn't that cowardly? But oh, my dear, my dear, how shall I ever bear that parting which is so near?"

"You really think it wiser to go, Philip," I ask, trying not to let there be any disappointment in my tone.

"It is my only hope," he answers me, covering my hands warmly and closely in his own, just as if to show me how he would hold and protect me if he could. "It is the only chance I have of ever winning you, darling, into my own home, and cherishing you there as you are cherished now in my heart. Dear love, for such an end a man may well work hard, and long, and uncomplaining, and I will—I will. You have calls enough upon your courage and your patience, my own love, without my giving you others. And I ought at least to comfort and encourage you until I can bear the hardness for you, and give you ease and rest at last. Oh, Jeanie, Jeanie, when shall we gain that sweet 'at last' we have so long thought of, and that seems to get farther from us day by day?"

"But is really coming nearer to us day by day," I correct, trying to look hopefully into Philip's grave, sad eyes. "And we are both young and faithful, and can wait."

"Dear," he whispers, in an unsteady voice, "I seem to have waited so long, and to be no nearer claiming you to-day than I was two years ago, when I found you first, my child-love. Not so near," he goes on, brokenly, "for I was full of hope and courage then, and now——"

"And now," I cry, not minding that my eyes are filled with tears, because I can only think of the two years of poverty and disappointment he has borne in vain, and which have told sadly on his strong young figure and his dauntless, gentle nature; "your child-love is a woman, Philip, and the love she gives you is stronger and truer a hundredfold than it was two years ago."

Then, as he gently takes my face between his hands once

more and kisses it, I see the old, steadfast, patient look come back into his eyes, and I shrink from asking him any questions that may chase it away. But he does not wait to be asked. He gives me the gloomy tidings tenderly, and tries to make me believe that he is not depressed and sick at heart because another scheme of his has failed.

"It was of on use," he says; "the post was filled an hour before I reached Stafford. Yet the manager seemed pleased too, Jeanie, with the specimen I took."

"Pleased! I should think so," I cry, and I can feel that my pride in him brings a warm colour into my cheeks. "Father says that when he went over the Worcester factories, years ago, he never saw any painting so clever as yours, Philip—none!"

"Perhaps," Philip answers, smiling gently, for he would never doubt my father's judgment; "painting on china has made a great advance since then, Jeanie. The work, in its perfection, is very beautiful now, dear."

"Yours is, Philip."

"Yes, mine is—sometimes," he assents, with a sigh which I see him try to stifle. "But I often get low, like a fool, and out of heart, and then my work is vile. I need no one to tell me this, I can see it myself, and, as I see it so different from my idea, you may guess my hand does not gain in cunning. But sometimes, again, I am satisfied with my own designs; and—yes, I think they are, even as you say, beautiful. If I had only one fair start," he cries, drawing his hand wearily through his hair, "I might—"

"Look the whole world in the face and owe not any man," I put in, trying to bring a smile to his harassed face.

"I might give you—but what is the use to think of an impossible case?" he says, unsteadily.

"Not impossible at all, Philip," I contradict. "It is two years nearer than it was when I knew you first, and then you said you should soon be at the top of the profession. Do you forget?"

"Forget!" he echoes, meeting my eyes with just his own old smile. "It takes a man more than two years to forget such castles as I built then, my darling. They have fallen about me in ashes, but I cannot *forget* them."

"Now, Philip," I say, trying in a most unnatural way to be cheerful, "tell me what is your next plan?"

At first I think he does not hear, for he stands quite still opposite me, looking at me in a wistful, questioning way, yet with his lips closed and stern. So I repeat the question, with a still greater effort to be cheerful—and consequently I think a still greater failure.

"My next plan," he said, in a hard, curt way, "is—America."

"Oh, Philip!"

The cry of sorrow and fear comes from me sore'y against my will; and, when I see the change it brings into his face, I understand that it was the strong command he had put upon himself which had made him tell me of this project so coldly and briefly.

"Don't say a word to me, Jeanie—not one word. It is ruin to me to stay here, and it is *you* only who can keep me."

But my heart is stronger because I have seen how he suffers, and I feel how unworthy I shall be of his great love, if I do not help him in such hours as these.

"If you say it is best for you to go, Philip," I say, as steadily as ever I can, "I shall know it really is best, and I shall—I shall think all day and night of how you will some day come home again to me, and of how happy we shall be—then."

"The dearest," he says, in a strange sort of intense whisper, holding my hands so tightly that he really pains me. And then it seems as if the other words he wished to say will not come. So I smile a little—though it all seems strange, as if my lips could never have known how to smile before—and say that he shall tell me everything next time he comes—next time.

"I had so much to tell you, Jeanie, to explain and soften that resolution I have had to make in my deep despair; and I have said nothing."

"You have told me of the resolution, Philip," I answer, almost steadily. "That is enough for this morning. It will seem different to me when you come next; and we can talk of other things—too. I—I see exactly what you mean, Philip—exactly."

"I do not," he says, in an odd, bitter way, as he turns his head suddenly from me. "I would to heaven I did! When will it all be clear?"

"Very soon," I answer, feeling strangely shy while I speak thus to Philip, because he has always been so much braver than I have; and there never was a time before this when I have had to speak as if he were impatient or discontented, "Very soon, Philip; and when we see our future clearly, as you say, we shall see it so bright! And we shall love it so—we two—always together. What will this little separation signify, for all will be bright at last? And—oh, my love, I am so faithful in my heart?"

I had not thought what words I was going to say. They came from me like a sob, in my great love and yearning, and in my pity for us both. Very quietly he holds me for a moment, while I feel the quick, irregular beating of his heart; then he leaves

upon my shaking lips one of his old long, gentle kisses, and I am alone; standing with my eyes covered that I may not see him go, for I am still so cowardly and so unworthy of his great love!

"Jeanie!"

It is father calling, and I run to him into the parlour behind the shop, and take my morning kiss; a double kiss this morning, because it is his birthday. Then I bring up his breakfast from the fire, where I have been keeping it warm ever since Lottie took Aunt Charlotte's up to bed to her, nearly half an hour before.

"Now, father dear," I whisper, putting one arm softly round him, when I give him his coffee, and dropping my eyes that they may not rest upon his worn and haggard face, "you must make a good meal, because, you know, however late you stay in the City, you never get yourself anything there, and you need it so much. And don't stay late to-day, dear," I plead, kissing his thin cheek, still with my eyes turned away. "Promise me you will not stay late. It is better far, dear, to be—to go on as we are, than for you to wear yourself out as you are—as you would do, I'm sure, in your hope of helping us."

"Go on as we are?" he murmurs, echoing my words drearily.

"Jeanie dear, we cannot go on as we are."

"Then things will get better," I put in, picking specks of dust from his worn coat.

"Or worse," he adds, very low, putting down his knife and fork, and looking out into the shop—no, not into it, but as if through it, into a great vacancy beyond.

"They cannot be worse, father dear," I say in quite a cheery sort of way. "The very first change that comes must necessarily be a change for the better."

"If I get nothing to do, Jean"—he never calls me "Jean" when he is not sorely troubled—"very soon everything we have must go."

"Why, father, there is no one to take them!" I say; but there comes a great lump into my throat quite suddenly, and a sort of mist before my eyes; for it does not need beautiful and costly things about one to make one love one's home and all within it; even with a strong and clinging love.

"But, if I do get employment," my father goes on, while I try in vain to give him the smile I can so plainly see he misses—"and I quite believe I soon shall, my dear—we may manage to tide over the winter, Jeanie."

"How good that will be, father!" I say, for indeed I feel very thankful to think we may pass the hardest season of all, and begin a fresh year.

"So you see, Jeanie," father says, rising with the very busiest

air imaginable, and looking, for a moment, quite important as he buttons up his thin black coat, "how much depends upon my going into the City, don't you?"

"Yes, father; but you will not walk too far, or fast too long?"

No, he will not. He will remember that he is old, and that is children are young—so he tells me, with the dreamy smile which makes his pinched face look a little like what I have seen it in the old days long ago.

I kiss him again, finding no words to answer this, and then we talk of other things, while he eats his breakfast, because I want to tempt him on to take more than he usually does, before his long day's walking, and talking, and anxiety, and disappointment. I tell him how Jennings's sister (Jennings is the boy who takes down our shop-shutters every morning) has a situation in Hammersmith, to which she goes to-night, and how Jennings begged a sheet of notepaper and an envelope to give her as a parting gift, and what a wise present I think it, because it will be sure to come back to him. I tell him that I believe Preston, the chemist, has a new assistant, and that Evan's windows next door look nice and dusty, and show off ours beautifully. Then (in quite the same tone) I tell him that Philip has been into the shop, having had quite ten minutes to stay and chat. But I do *not* tell him of the two new prints in the stationer's opposite, nor—nor of what Philip came to tell me.

"Now, father," I say at last, when he has left the table, and I am putting into paper for him a good slice of my seed cake, "you will eat this, won't you, as you pass through some unfrequented street? Don't forget it, as you did yesterday, and bring it home unopened. I really shall feel it a personal insult, and shall know you are as hard to please as Aunt Charlotte, who says my cakes want richness."

"My dear," he explains, anxiously, "I always enjoy it, but I forgot it yesterday. Yes, I will eat it surely, Jeanie. As for the unfrequented streets, dear, why, I know plenty of frequented ones in the City where I could peacefully demolish a whole loaf, without anyone but myself being aware of the dark deed. Now are you sure you have told me everything you want for the shop?"

I give him a list, scarcely one item is more than the merest trifle, but the memorandum is elaborately copied out and explained, to give it an air of importance. Then I brush his hat, and tie on his comforter, and by that time we hear Aunt Charlotte's heavy step, and she meets us, leaning heavily upon Lottie's shoulder.

The taking up of Aunt Charlotte's breakfast, waiting on her while she eats it, and then assisting her industriously during the protracted performance of dressing, is always Lottie's morning work, while I have the breakfast to prepare, father's coffee to pour out, and the shop to dust and arrange. And (fortunately, I think) it very rarely happens that father has not started before Aunt Charlotte makes her appearance downstairs, always entering so heavily and so gloomily, with her hand on Lottie's shoulder, looking as if she hated each fresh day as it comes, and always seeming injured if this gloomy shadow does not reach Lottie's gentle face below her.

But to-day father meets her, as I say, and so turns back, after his cheery greeting to her, to wheel her chair to the fire.

"Going out again, Steven!" she exclaims, in her most fretful tone. "You must have plenty of money to spare. No one who had not his purse full would go backwards and forwards to town as you do day after day.

"My dear, I am going to make the little that I have into much," father says, speaking hopefully, as he invariably does to Aunt Charlotte in her dismal, worrying moods.

"Well," she sighs, pushing away the knitting Lottie brings her, "it is only wasting words to tell you what I think about it. You will never see your own imprudence, I'm convinced, till it's too late. But then I am glad to think its consequence will be a more effectual punishment than any warning words."

"And a sharper one too, Charlotte."

Aunt Charlotte turns her head away impatiently, at these gentle words.

"You none of you feel things as I do," she moans; "but how can I expect you should. You don't sit here all day thinking what might have been. You are not capable of looking far on and seeing the ruin and poverty that threatens us. You act like babies, and don't seem to know what misery means. You laugh as you never could if you felt for those who suffer denials like me. You have no consideration for me. You forget that I know how things ought to be with us if right were done."

"I remember Who knows exactly how things ought to be with us, and Who will some day set them right," my father whispers, so low that I think no one hears him but me; for I always do hear every word he says, whatever I may be doing, because I have been so long trying to be to him just a little what mother was.

"If turning into fun things that ought to be cried over, would bring us money," Aunt Charlotte goes on, icily, "I would

try to do it. And if laughing would provide any one of us with warm clothes for the winter, I would try to laugh too."

"Do, Charlotte," poor father interposes, with quite a beaming smile. "Do try, my dear, and then at any rate we shall—see."

"I never," says Aunt Charlotte, with a slow rigid gaze into poor father's face, "saw anything so ridiculous, Steven, as your pretending to believe we are not hopelessly poor, and need not be utterly depressed. Why, bless me, just tell me what we are, if we are not about the very poorest people in Hackney!"

"I don't know—I don't know what we are, if not," murmurs poor father, the frail gleam of spirit quite dead now.

"And Jean is the worst of you all," Aunt Charlotte goes on, for she seldom has one of these fretful attacks without very specially alluding to me. "She sings about the house, while I may sit here and break my heart."

Then father pauses a moment, just as he is leaving the room, and lays his gentle hand upon my head.

"Even Jeanie's singing," he says, "does not make us poorer. She has care enough, for we all lean on her young willing hands. She has need of some brightness, even if she has to make it for herself as well as for us. God bless her! Let her sing."

CHAPTER II.

STANDING just within the shop door, I watch father out of sight, just as I watched the children; then I go back to have my own breakfast with Lottie, if we can both be spared for it just then. And we can, for Aunt Charlotte is too moody and silent now to find employment for either of us. We, too, are unusually silent this morning, Lottie looking pale and tired, though it is so early, and I haunted ceaselessly by the memory that Philip is going away from me.

When our breakfast is over (it is always a brief meal enough, but to-day it is briefer than usual), Lottie helps me to carry the things down into the kitchen, then takes her sewing, and sits where she can mind the shop, as well as be near enough to Aunt Charlotte to wait upon her, and to talk to her if she should feel inclined to talk. I do not sing this morning as I go about my household work, but it is quite late on before I discover this fact, stopping and wondering over it then, with a sort of solitary self-pitying little laugh. I am dusting Aunt Charlotte's bedroom, and, without exactly knowing what thought follows my discovery, I go up to her glass and look at my own face. It is not

changed. It looks no older than it did this morning, when I stood plaiting my hair, and romancing with Lottie upon happy impossibilities, while she sat up in bed screwing her courage for the final plunge out into the cold. Yet I never dreamed then of Philip going—nor will I dream of it now, for, if I do, oh, how heavily, how heavily the hours will pass! And when father comes— No, not another thought. What a blessing work is! I daresay many a girl's heart is saved from breaking, and her thoughts saved from bitterness, by daily tasks that must be done for others.

While the potatoes are steaming, I run up to lay the cloth for dinner; and finding Lottie has done that for me, I stay a few minutes chatting by Aunt Charlotte's chair, before I go down again to broil her chop. It is not an extra large or fine one, but as father brought it from town yesterday so cautiously and circumspectly, and as I have cooked it with the greatest care, it has such an intrinsic value in my eyes that I feel as if Aunt Charlotte must surely make some pleasant remark upon it. But she does not. There are plenty of potatoes for Lottie and me and the children, and we are all healthy, and can enjoy a meal of potatoes or bread and cheese most heartily—Lottie especially, because she is growing so fast that she is generally hungry; but indeed father says that I, though I am nearly nineteen (six years older than Lottie), am growing too.

When I have washed up and put everything away after dinner, and changed my frock, it is my turn to mind shop; so I get the waistcoat I am making for father, and stitch at it, helping Lottie the while with her lessons. Poor little Lottie! These lessons of hers are a struggle for both of us, and I am sure she must know as well as I do (though she would never say it, never) that I am scarcely educated enough myself to help her, and that, if father could possibly afford to send her to school, she would soon be a very clever girl, as well as such a very happy one.

"Don't you ever wonder, Jean," she says to me sometimes—but very seldom—"why things should be always hard for us, when they seem to be so smooth for other people? Oh! how it puzzles me when I see girls of my own age going to school so unwillingly, while I should think it such a great blessing! Jean, what are we to do? No one gives father anything to do, and I don't wonder. Even you don't wonder, Jeanie, though you so persistently pretend you see no change in him; for he gets to look weak and old, poor father! No one comes into the shop, and of course they never will while everything looks so new and tempting in the other windows in the street. No one takes our

lodgings; and we cannot advertise to bring people here. Aunt Charlotte is always groaning or complaining, and making everything far more hard to bear than even it must be. You have hardly had any opportunities yourself for learning. Poor father gets no time to help either of us. There's no end to our work, Jean—yours and mine."

"I like the work, dear," I answer, quietly, "and better times will come."

"Your always saying that, doesn't bring them, Jean," Lottie answers, in a quick, petulant way, unusual with her, and so sad to hear. "How are better times to come? Will the things in the shop get newer and more saleable while we wait for customers? Do the rooms we have to let grow more attractive while we are paying rent for them to be unoccupied? Will father be more likely to be engaged as he gets older and weaker? Doesn't Aunt Charlotte get harder and crosser every day, and don't the boys grow out of all their clothes; wearing everything into holes, and always so hungry?"

"Always hungry and healthy, thank heaven," I say. "And, though there is nothing we can do just now to lessen our poverty, Lottie,—because, though I am old enough to go out and earn money, I cannot be spared—still we can make the best of it, dear, and try to make the work pleasant to each other."

Then Lottie has a passionate fit of crying, hiding her face upon my shoulder, where she cannot see my tears, and blames herself cruelly for being fretful, and for—oh, for a hundred things for which she is not really one atom to blame! And she clings to me so lovingly that I begin to wonder whether our love could be so great if our possessions were greater; and it all seems very fair to me. There is an old agreement between us that, whenever we let our two rooms, Lottie shall go to an afternoon school, it being impossible to spare her for the whole day while Aunt Charlotte is so exacting, and while there is so much to do irrespective of her.

"But there will be more to do if we have lodgers," Lottie says, with a momentary qualm.

This idea I will not entertain for a moment. Perhaps we may be so wonderfully fortunate as to meet with a single gentleman who would be away all day. At any rate, it is no harm to assure Lottie how highly probable this is.

I am very busy all the afternoon over father's waistcoat, because I do so want it to be ready when he comes home. We always try to have a sort of little festival at night on his birthday.

Lottie has after long saving, bought a bottle of sherry for him,

and the little boys have clubbed their entire wealth to buy him a tie, over which, and the keeping of the great secret, they have had pleasure and excitement far beyond its value. So far Aunt Charlotte has not apparently remembered the day; and we are not surprised, because she is only his half-sister, and a great deal older than he is.

I fetch her one of the papers from the shop, and beg her to read to herself, just this once, as I am so anxious to sew. And she takes it, and turns it over to look at the date, as if she fancied I have brought her a yesterday's news.

"Ninth of October? Is that to-day? Why, bless me, girls, this is your father's birthday!" she says, laying the paper down on her knee, and looking from me, at my sewing, to Lottie bending over her copybook. "Dear, dear, he must be fifty-five to-day; and yet I remember the old farm before he was born."

It is so unusual for Aunt Charlotte to speak gently to us, that in a moment Lottie looks up from her copy and I from my work. Will she tell us something of that old time at home, of which we know so very little? At first I think she will; but then quite suddenly she turns her eyes away from us, and fixes them upon the fire, just in her old, heavy-hearted way. But I, dreading to see the usual stiffness come back, question her softly, as I go on with my sewing.

"You mean when you were all living together, Aunt Charlotte, in the Worcestershire farm?"

No answer; and, without looking up, I see that Lottie goes back to her writing in despair. But I try again.

"The quarrel had not happened then; had it, Aunt Charlotte?"

"How can a person quarrel before he is born?"

"Do you mean," I ask—and I know it to be a very bold question, though a quiet one—"that the man who so wickedly caused the mischief between father and his brother, was not born then?"

I can feel Aunt Charlotte's eyes upon me, very steady and very penetrating, and I am within an inch of succumbing and letting her silence us by silence, as she has done so many hundreds of times before; but something gives me unusual courage this afternoon, and I frankly and coaxingly meet her gaze, and beg her to tell us of that quarrel.

"There is nothing to tell, child," she says, curtly, but not in her most quenching way. "What can be told about a thing no one ever understood? Nothing ever came between the two brothers till Christian Murray grew so thick with your uncle. I don't know what it was for. What is the use of asking me."

Steven—your father—should have roused himself and found out. He would sleep through any mischief you chose to work him; so he deserves it. Why did he stand by, like a baby, and see this man weaning his elder brother's heart from him?"

"If my uncle had been true and honourable himself, he never could have been influenced in that way against his younger brother", I say, hotly. But Aunt Charlotte does not seem to hear me.

"Murray succeeded in everything he tried," she goes on, heavily. "He persuaded your uncle to sell the old farm—which he, as eldest son, had power to do—and then to go out with him to Australia; then, you see, your uncle was abundantly supplied with money. And the coldness to Steven—above all, the injustice to him in taking the means of livelihood from him—was never explained. Those are the bare facts, and who can give you more? Men can be so utterly blind at times, else why should not Steven have guessed the lies Murray was telling of him, and the underhand dealings necessary for a villain to establish himself securely between two such good-hearted, unsuspicious men? But he had determined to do it, and he had the necessary craft and cunning. I suppose a thoroughly unscrupulous man can make lies sound like truth, when he has won a certain hold upon you. This man must, at any rate, have done it; and your father's submissive, unsuspicious nature—as of course the knave knew—would ensure his success."

"Was my uncle not an unsuspicious man too?" I ask; but Aunt Charlotte laughs scornfully and harshly.

"Not he. If he had not been as great a liar as his friend, he would not have been led by him. He," Aunt Charlotte goes on, a little contradicting, I fancy, her words a few minutes ago, "was not a baby in the ways of the world, like your poor father."

"Father could never have been anything but good, and gentle, and generous, as he is now," I say, finding it hard to utter even those few words steadily, when I think of father being left with no future, as it were; and only able to fall into certain lines of life for which he had no talent or fondness, however much he might try to make the best of them, and do his best in them.

"I daresay," returns Aunt Charlotte, with ungracious brevity.

"It must have been a very wretched time, Aunt Charlotte," I say, tempting her on to tell us more.

"Wretched? I should think so!" is her prompt response. "Wretched for us all, but doubly so for Steven. Yet soon afterwards, being just set up here, and having, I declare, nothing certain to depend upon, he must go and marry a girl who brought him literally not a farthing; who actually possessed nothing but

a small trunk of clothes, and who soon became sickly enough to be a perpetual expense and trouble to him."

"Anxiety you mean. Aunt Charlotte—never trouble," I correct, in a firm way that makes Lottie lift her eyes nervously to me. "You cannot use that word, if you remember how dearly he loved her."

"*That* didn't make up the quarrel," was the pettish reply; "and since then there has been no hope of it. Christian Murray, out in Australia, is using for his own purposes his dupe's money, and using his dupe himself as he chooses, you may be very sure."

"Then Uncle Adolphus is not dead?"

"I know nothing," snaps Aunt Charlotte, "except that he cannot possibly be more dead to us than he has been for twenty years; while your father has steadily got poorer and poorer. What else can one expect from him? He will be a poor man all his life!"

We do not argue this question, Lottie and I. It is too sore a one, as Aunt Charlotte always puts it. So there falls a silence amongst us, while I just wonder a little how Aunt Charlotte can always so utterly forget that from that very time she has been speaking of, twenty years ago, when she lost her home too, she has shared father's; never being allowed to think it given in charity to her, and always made much of by him. But soon I turn from that memory to the thought of how intensely happy I know my father was—even in his poverty—with our mother.

"Jeanie!" It is a sudden whisper from Lottie, as she looks eagerly through the shop out into the street; and my eyes follow hers.

"Jeanie, it is a customer, I do believe. He first looked into the window, then up at the name over the door, and I am sure he will come in, if you only wait a moment. Yes, Jeanie, look; he is coming into the shop!"

CHAPTER III.

I go into the shop as sedately as if I were used to being constantly summoned there to good customers, and I stand ready to wait upon this stranger, just as if my heart were not beating insanely in rare hopefulness. He raises his hat a moment, in an old-fashioned, ceremonious way, as he comes forward to the counter, and gives me the opportunity to look at him. He is a slight, young man, and is dressed in a loose, grey suit, with a round felt hat of the same colour. He has a florid complexion, and thick, curly brown hair. His eyes are blue and bright,

though rather small, and his features are all good, though small too. His expression is pleasant, but a certain forced smile, which comes too frequently to his lips, and stays too long, takes the ease somehow from his whole appearance. He speaks well, but with an awkward lisp, and a rapidity which sounds almost foreign.

He has seen the card in our window, he says, and will be glad to look at the rooms I have to let.

"Ah, how good this is! A possible lodger is even better than a possible customer. I lead him from the shop, with my heart beating in the most ridiculously childish manner. Suppose he knew! Suppose he knew what words go up in silence from my heart, when I have shown him the two rooms, and stand waiting for his decision! He does not praise or admire the lodgings at all (our two prized best rooms!) he only, with a stiff bow, makes me aware that he is ready to return to the shop. When we reach it he says very little, speaking politely—gently, I should say, only for that broad, silly smile on his face, and a certain ill-at-ease affectation of youthfulness which is rather ludicrous in so young a man. He regrets, he tells me, that he cannot let me know his decision until the next day, and he asks me if I will kindly keep the rooms until then.

Of course I promise, because it is so natural that he should not care to decide at once. And when I have promised, he gives me another of his wide, quick smiles, and goes.

"Lottie! Lottie!"

She has gone to fetch the kettle to boil in the parlour, because long ago we let out the kitchen fire, so I rush down after her; and when she clasps her hands and begins to dance I race from her round the table, and she catches me. But as for my catching her—well I daresay it is because I have not time, for Aunt Charlotte utters a groan which, in its concentrated misery, shows us that she hears our laughter, and which takes us up as swiftly and decorously as possible, Lottie with the kettle, and I with the tray. This tea is to be a feast, because of father's birthday, but we find the preparations hindered a good deal by Aunt Charlotte's damping observations.

It is quite eight o'clock when father at last comes in, and he looks so worn and tired that I know in a moment all the history of his City search, and I try to stop a word of questioning for him. But Aunt Charlotte does not feel so, and goes back and back to her inquiries, after every little success of mine in driving her from them.

"Now, father," the children cry, excitedly, "don't open your parcels till you guess them."

So, before he has his tea, father has to make wild, unlikely guesses over our three parcels. Lottie's bottle of sherry he first guesses to be hair-oil, to Stevie's intense delight; and then—after longer pondering than ever—he asks Dolf if it isn't ink!

I do not mind this delay, because I can sit with my arm in his, and my head on his shoulder, laughing at him as he surmises, and seeing his dear eyes brighten, as they always do, over the pleasure of his little lads.

But at last, having guessed nothing correctly, he is allowed to open his presents; and then, when he has kissed us all for them—just as he could only do if they were most rare and costly gifts—the children release him, and let him have his tea in peace. And while we have it, as a happier birthday present than all, I tell him of our new lodger, finding it very hard indeed to tell this in any but the most exuberant of tones; which perhaps Aunt Charlotte thinks very unwise, for she immediately reminds him that gentlemen who like the look of rooms, and have any intention of taking them, always do so at once; and that when a lodger says he will write or call again it means simply that he does not intend you ever to see him or hear from him again.

"Even if so," father says, quite pleasantly, though I can see he has let his hopefulness grow as great as ours, and is suddenly rather ashamed of himself—poor father!—"we shall only be just where we were before, Charlotte, my dear."

Then I describe the new lodger again—as I did before to Lottie in the kitchen—until father laughs, and, with a touch of the old humour we see so seldom now, tells me that, judging by my description of the young man, he would make Philip Ashton look very ordinary indeed. We have just finished tea, and are chatting about the fire—I just a little astonished that Philip does not come in—when rather a strange thing happens; strange, I mean, when we recollect how long our rooms have been vacant, and the card unnoticed in the window. Mr. Lowe, the landlord of the inn above, comes in to ask us to let two rooms to a gentleman who has just arrived from Paris, and who will take them at once, as he likes the locality. He is not only willing to pay two guineas a week, but will engage them for a permanency, as he hates change of all kind. But Mr. Lowe adds that this gentleman must have a decisive answer to-night.

There is a little silence after this has been said, and we have all understood it exactly. Father looks at me, and I look at father. This weekly sum is nearly three times what we have asked the young gentleman who called this afternoon, and who, after all, may never come again. Two guineas weekly would be

like a fortune to us; a rest for father, school and happiness for Lottie, little luxuries for Aunt Charlotte, a certainty for us all, and—I see how father is thinking of all this just as I am. But I see, too, that the thought which follows it for me is father's thought.

"Too late, Jeanie?" he says, while for a moment his unsteady hand goes to his forehead.

"Yes, father, I have promised."

For quite half an hour Mr. Lowe stays, trying to tempt us to change our decision; but the moment of temptation has passed, and father only quietly says he will not break his promise, and evidently fancies he says it as determinately as he thinks it.

When the persuasions are over, and Mr. Lowe has gone Aunt Charlotte gives freer vent to her angry mortification.

"I never knew anyone like you, Steven, for standing persistently in your own light," she says; and of course, in these selfish qualms of yours, you stand in my light too, and the children's. Two guineas a week would make us a little bit comfortable, as you can never do while you are getting nothing."

"Oh, hush!" I whisper, seeing the look of despair—so new to it—which falls across father's tired face. Ah, she must forget this is his birthday.

"Father," says Lottie, brightly when she bids him good night; "our new lodger will sure to be a great success, because he chanced to come on your birthday."

"And did not the other chance to come on your birthday too?" inquires Aunt Charlotte, in such a different tone from little Lottie's! "and you voluntarily sent him away."

CHAPTER IV.

It is next morning, and at last I can tell father what Philip came to break to me yesterday. Father says but little; only bids me have courage and wait, because—but there is no need to tell what more he says, in that low, long whisper of his, while one thin, gentle hand lies on my head.

So, when Philip comes in, a few minutes afterwards, I meet him just as he must be so very much used to see me meet him, with both my hands so willingly offered, and my eyes telling so plainly what joy it is to see him.

"Oh, Philip," I cry, in untold gladness, as I read some new look in his face, and hear a new lightness in his step, "it is not good-bye! I see that you have good news for me—at last!"

"Not quite yet, my dearest," he says, even laughing a little to see the gladness of my face, as he could not laugh if his own were not just as glad, "but very soon, I think. I have heard of such a good chance, Jeanie, and I am going now to try for it. Wish me success, dear love."

How I wish it him no one need ever know, while only the wonderful sunlight all about me *now* shows me how great has been that pain with which I have fought so secretly since—just only four and twenty hours before—Philip told me he must leave me. Perhaps we need not separate now. He might be going to work near us now, so that each day I might still see him.

"Didn't you wonder that I did not come last night?" he asks, presently. "Did you think I forgot it was your father's birthday, Jeanie?"

"No, I never thought that, Philip. I only fancied you were tired and disappointed; and I felt that you thought it would be hard for me, as I should be faint-hearted and spoil——"

"Spoil everything," Philip puts in, with that pleasant laugh of his that I have heard so seldom lately. "You generally do spoil everything for everybody. Witness your keeping me here now, and spoiling my chance for me."

"But what is it, Philip?" I inquire, taking away my hand, and looking perfectly ready to part with him.

"My old master has advertised for a first-class hand for Worcester work, Jeanie, and I am going now to beg him to take me. I have my best specimens, and he will help me, I'm sure, for he always said my flowers were unequalled. It will be such a good berth, my dear. They are the finest works in Worcestershire, and no one could be more grateful than I should be to get the post."

"When shall you know, Philip?"—the words falter a little in my irrespressible delight.

"In a few days, I ve. But you will see me to-night. I cannot spend another day without a few minutes' rest and enjoyment with you. *This* is no happy festival for me to spoil with my long face."

"I too, Philip," I cry, my eyes dancing with delight, "shall have good news to tell you, I believe. What should you say if by that time we had a—lodger upstairs?"

"My darling, if you thought to have the Koh-i-noor, you could not look more grateful," Philip says, pausing one moment on the threshold, and glancing almost sadly into my face. "What should I say? I should say 'Happy fellow!'"

And it is just as Philip says it, standing in the doorway, that some one from without turns, pauses just one second as if in doubt, glances up at the name above the windows, and then

crosses the threshold as Philip stands upon it. He does not look up at Philip, though Philip glances down rather quizzically upon him, but he turns, with his ceremonious bow and broad smile, to me.

"I hope you kept the rooms for me," he says; while Philip smiles and nods his farewell to me across our little lodger's head, and I see in his eyes just the merry glance that used to belong to them before times grew so hard with him.

"My name is Carden," our new lodger tells me, setting down a small, old-fashioned hair trunk which he carries in his hand. "I forgot to leave you my name yesterday. I daresay you thought I should never turn up again."

Aunt Charlotte thought so. But I do not say that, I only think it, while I catch myself staring with inexcusable curiosity at the hideous bull's head carved on the handle of his umbrella.

Of course he does not guess how sorely last night we were tempted not to keep the rooms for him (I remind myself of that, and of how good this project seemed before the other flashed upon us), and presently I am just as proud of leading him upstairs as I knew yesterday that I should be if he really decided to come.

He has no luggage but the small hair trunk, and the umbrella with the bull's head, and both of these, before he turns to speak to me, he deposits fussily in a corner of his sitting-room. I do not like his lisping voice after Philip's; and I do not like the perpetual smile which only stirs his lips, after the quiet merriment of Philip's eyes; and I am quite, quite sure that Philip would never have stood there talking to me with his hat on! Yet, though I try quite hard and unkindly to do it, I cannot tell Lottie, when I go down-stairs to her, that our new lodger is ungentlemanly.

"He is everything that is nice, Jeanie," laughs Lottie, "because, now he has come, I am to go to school every afternoon; you don't forget?"

Forget—when this has been one of the chief reasons of my great joy to see him, and the foundation of this ridiculous gratitude which I feel towards him!

CHAPTER V.

EVERY Saturday afternoon is a sort of half-holiday for us. Until these last few weeks, when Philip has been unemployed, and so busily seeking employment, he has always made it a gala

afternoon for me, and very often for either father or Lottie too. But lately that has been impossible, and we have only gone together for a pleasant walk, after my little marketing excursion has been over. But to-day I feel so very, very happy about Philip's not going away, that I know, if we can only manage a walk together to market, it will be quite a joyful afternoon. Three or four precious hours with Philip, and all the while the happy consciousness that he is not going away from me into another world as I thought until yesterday—happy yesterday.

All morning I sing about my work, and run from room to room, and say such mad and merry words to Lottie that Aunt Charlotte rebukes her for laughing.

"You are sure to cry at night, if you begin the day with laughter," she says; and that stops Lottie quite effectually. But it cannot stop my happy thoughts, and when I run to kiss father on his return, and he sees them in my eyes, I think he is glad. My seed-cake and Sunday pudding are made by that time, and his dinner is ready, so we sit down at once, and father tells us quite cheerfully, all about his morning in the City.

"Aunt Charlotte," says Lottie, wondering over her grave face, when just now everything is looking bright for us, "don't forget we have our lodger now. I have to remind myself every minute or two, because it seems too good to be true, after our long, long waiting."

"All that long waiting has to be made up for before we can think of any profit," Aunt Charlotte answers. And somehow, in my great regret that she can see things only so sorrowfully, I go round quietly and kiss her, while I pretend to be only changing her plate.

We clear the table together, Lottie and I, because father is in the shop, and Aunt Charlotte will nap a little; and, when everything is washed and put away, I run upstairs to prepare for a walk to the Columbia Market—with Philip.

"I wish you could look a little gayer," Lottie says, surveying me with loving, though rather dissatisfied eyes, as I take a look at myself before going down; "but you could never look shabby, Jeanie. I don't know why. I daresay Philip knows."

I am still laughing over my little sister's loving nonsense, as she runs downstairs with me when I hear Philip's voice in the parlour. He is begging father to let him close the shop (as we used to do on Saturday afternoons), but father says no, he will keep it open to-day. Then Philip sees me, and he comes and kisses me, and takes from me the bag I shall want for my marketing.

"Please don't expect us home very early," he says, while I give

my good-bye kisses, "because I want to tempt Jeanie into the museum for an hour."

Of course he knows no tempting is needed beyond his wish to go; of course he sees in a moment that I am delighted at the thought; yet he pretends to think it a very doubtful matter indeed. Mr. Carden is waiting at the shop door; and as Philip has been called back by Aunt Charlotte, and only the little boys are hovering about me, I stay and speak to him, wondering what it is that makes him seem so lonely, so isolated, as it were, whether in our rather noisy house or in the busy street. In his halting, lisping way, he asks me where I am going, and I tell him, my eyes brightening I am sure, as I add that, after my marketing is over, Philip will take me to the Bethnal Green Museum. But he does not answer that; he only asks me, quite politely, though he looks out into the street the while, if I will kindly buy him a pound of tea if I do not forget. I promise him I will not forget, and by that time Philip is free, and we start off together.

"Oh, Philip," I say, lifting my glad face to his, "if only everybody could be as happy as I am just this minute! How very, very lonely our new lodger seems to-day! Did you notice how strangely he looked after us? And he was looking so still, when I glanced back at father."

Philip has not noticed that; but he too seems to have remarked that strange solitariness about Mr. Carden, and he talks of it now, wondering if there is anything he can do to lessen it. What a walk it is for us! It is not bright weather, nor is there anything pretty or fresh on the way, yet it seems to me a beautiful walk to-day, as we saunter on, seeing everything, hearing everything, yet talking all the while to each other of that happy future which seems now so near. We picture—oh, how brilliantly we picture it!—that home Philip will earn in Worcestershire, and to which, he tells me, he shall fetch me in the bright spring days. Then we picture how father will sell the business and come and live with us, having a dear little room of his own, with his favourite books in it, and will rest at last; how the little boys will go to a better school then, and Lottie learn as she longs to learn, and grow strong and rosy; how we will have a beautiful garden, and Philip will copy his own flowers, and design so beautifully that his name will soon be famous; how Aunt Charlotte will grow placid, because she will have everything she wishes, and shall not be troubled about a single thing. Ah, how pleasant all this dreaming is! And how Philip laughs when I suggest that we ask Mr. Carden to go with us.

They are but trifling things I have to buy when we reach the market, yet they soon seem to fill the bag, and I have hard work to pack them compactly. Philip enjoys it as childishly as I do, making a fresh joke over every fresh purchase, and now and then whispering to me so merrily about our future housekeeping, while I pack my parcels into the bag he holds, that more than once I look up to catch some one smiling at us.

There is always a great fascination for me in watching people's faces, and once or twice Philip has to remind me with a laugh that we need not spend the whole of our afternoon in the Columbia Market.

"But, Philip," I whisper, stooping to put a rosy apple into the begrimed little hand of a city Arab, "isn't it worth much to see a real babyish smile of enjoyment break on such a haggard, worldly little face?"

"There is very little that is babyish here," Philip answers, giving way as one of the eager, half starved children shuffles by, groping for stray morsels. "I wonder how it feels to a lad to grow up utterly without care or love."

"It can scarcely be like life," I say, "because we live in what we love; and, even more, in what loves us. Oh, I wish I felt my love was to you all that yours is to me."

"It is more," he answers, very low and tenderly. "Of course there are different kinds of love; but there is one that holds and exalts and strengthens us—and yours is that, my dearest. I would not give up my *love* for the riches of any other man in the world."

"I think a walk here does one good, Philip," I say, as we go slowly out into the street. "It is well, now and then, to see how poor others are. I think the first step towards growing brave and worthy to be well of, is to bear denial without complaint—as—as father does, Philip."

"And no one else we know?" he questions, smiling. For of course he knows many who do; his knowledge is so much larger than mine.

Philip leaves the heavy bag at a house where he once lodged for a time, and then we walk on more quickly to Bethnal Green.

We choose a way through narrow, dingy streets, not only because it is shorter, but because we escape the din of the Hackney Road, and can hear each other's voices. So the way seems quite short, and when we reach the museum I am eagerly ready to enjoy everything. It always dazzles me a little just at first, because of course there has been nothing on our way to prepare us for suddenly standing surrounded by splendour—Indian

splendour, which must surely outshine our own royal magnificence.

I do not know how long a time Philip and I have spent, standing rapt and delighted—Philip especially—before the exquisite handiwork of other men, when at last we go upstairs to the picture-gallery.

"You are so patient and pleasant while I keep you dawdling among the porcelain, Jeanie," Philip says (he often tells a fib like that), "that you deserve a rest among the pictures. I know you like that."

Most of the seats are occupied, but presently we find one on which there is only a small old gentleman, with an open book in his hand; a curious little old gentleman in a huge great-coat and a broad-brimmed hat, like a Quaker in a picture.

"Pleasant day for a holiday, sir," observes Philip, presently, in his genial-hearted way. But the old gentleman only looks icily at us through his spectacles; and then, after an ominous little silence, remarks that it is not everybody who can take a holiday when he chooses. I think how mistaken he is in supposing that Philip can, and I think how much more the heart can make a holiday than the fact of having no work to do; but there seems a sort of suppressed rage about this little old gentleman, so I do not venture to speak at all to him, but turn a little sideways and look again at that strange painting of the six days of the Creation. I wonder once more why the angels have all the same melancholy eyes set very far apart, and the same squeamish expression on their lips; I wonder again whether it is the weight of their hair, or the fact of their being so alike which makes them all feel unhappy; and then my thoughts go on from the wonderful painting of the picture to the still more wonderful story it tells, until I am recalled by Philip's dear, happy tones, and I find he is talking away to that little old gentleman on his favourite subject of china-painting. He speaks like the true artist he is, but there is not the faintest expression of sympathy in his listener's face.

"I could fancy no prouder moment," Philip says, "than to have it given me to paint a wreath upon the torquoise blue of real old Sèvres—the new, both in colour and in finish, is not to be compared with it."

"You could fancy no prouder moment," repeats the little old gentleman, with a sort of grunt. "Then what about this moment when you have your—sweetheart, eh, beside you?"

"Beside me?" Philip answers, with his pleasant smile. "She knows that that moment could not come unless she were

"What?" exclaims the little old gentleman, with a sharp glance, across Philip, straight into my face. "You are thinking of marrying, eh?"

"Yes," I answer, quite readily, fearing Philip may feel angry for my sake.

But Philip is too happy to be angry.

"Yes," he says, quite proudly, and with a strange look down upon the old gentleman, as if he even pitied him, "I am proud and grateful to say we are thinking, as you say, of marrying."

"You live in this neighbourhood, I suppose?" inquires this curt old gentleman, and yet not rudely; indeed so almost gently that I am not surprised to hear Philip do more than simply answer him. He tells of his art-education; of his success in his profession; of the broken arm which has been such a terribly serious thing to him; of his difficulty in winning another engagement afterwards; of the long seeking and waiting; and then of the new appointment which he feels so sure of gaining. Very quietly the old gentleman sits to listen, yet his voice is anything but kindly when he breaks the silence which follows Philip's little story.

"I advise you to go to this new appointment without a wife."

"I must," Philip says; while I feel a little uncomfortable, and try to fix my thoughts, as well as my eyes, on a vivid representation of the judgment of Solomon, which, though Philip admires it, tempts me to laugh. "I must, for she will not be spared to me yet, I am sorry to say."

"You want to go with him, I suppose?" the old man asks me, rather suddenly. But Philip firmly interrupts this question, though still kindly.

I wish this stranger would go away and leave us, and yet I can see that Philip would think the wish unkind; for, if this solitary old man likes to talk a little on a holiday afternoon, surely it is good-natured to let him.

Thinking this, I turn and look over the gallery, and make a common-place remark to the little old gentleman about the splendour of the things our Prince has lent us.

"Of what use are they?" he asks me, snappishly. "Are you both artists then, with no notion of being useful in the world?"

"I think we have our notions," Philip answers, still forbearing and patient with this uncomfortable old gentleman. Then I turn away again, for there is always room for thought among the pictures, and I do not listen any more, until Philip touches my hand, as he gaily questions his companion.

"Is your experience very wide, sir?"

I am not sorry to look away from the painting of a sunset on the sea, for, beautiful as it is, it reminds me so of what those days and nights have been while I have thought Philip was going to sail so far from me, and he never guesses that I turn with such a happy smile because he is not going to leave me.

"I've had experience enough," the stranger answers, rather grimly. "There is no need of a very wide one on such a narrow subject. I've learned that men have but two reasons for marrying. If a man has more brains than are necessary to guide his own affairs, he takes some one else's in hand, and marries. If a man has more money than he can spend on himself, he knows a wife will soon help him to spend it, so he marries. I don't know anything about your little friend, but women are all formed with only one desire—that of dress."

"Don't you know a woman," Philip asks, "whose thoughts rarely rest upon herself at all? Are there not those whose lives are spent for others?"

"Evidently," this strange man mutters, with a queer little grunt, "a man can make himself believe anything when he seeks an excuse for marrying. Well, go on and try it. Yet I should like you to be warned in time. I've seen often enough the ruin it has brought, and could give you instances by the score. I once knew two young fellows who were clerks in the same office. For years they had been like brothers, when one morning one of them hung up his inky office-coat, and went away—to be married. And the other, as the coat hung there, drove a nail through it into the wall, knowing his friend would never come back. He was right enough too, for this friend, a bright merry lad, with a true and loving nature, was just the one to make a thoughtless marriage. (This with a shrewd, slow glance from Philip's face to mine.) "Before her marriage his sweetheart had never shown him either her selfishness or her ill-temper, and had even kept from him the fact that she was sickly. But directly afterwards he knew it only too well. She was constantly ailing, constantly complaining, exacting impossible service, and entailing ruinous expense. He never complained; he worked hard at a business he hated, because he could not otherwise supply her with the delicacies she fretted for. He devoted to her all he earned; gave her every hour of his leisure; never between business hours left the close room, where she allowed no breath of air; came home from his hard day's work to the harder work of trying to cheer her, and went back to his day's work after a night which had known no rest. No one came and tempted him from this terrible life, until one day—after six years had passed, without one single day or night of holiday for him—he stood beside her bed with such a

strange and awful look upon his face that she sprang up, as if she never had felt herself powerless. 'Lie still, dear,' he said, quite quietly, by force of habit. 'Others will nurse you now. I cannot. I am ill, and my brain is gone.' He died soon after that, in the asylum, and she lives still. But his fellow-clerk, a single man, of course, is one of the richest men now in——. What need is there to tell you where? Such stories are common enough."

I have risen, and am longing to go away, yet still that strange note of pathos in the old man's voice stirs me strangely. I picture father in this solitary, bitter mood, and all the while my heart beats with gratitude to think that he is so different.

"Young men won't be warned," he goes on, as Philip rises too, and quietly takes my hand in his. "I suppose you can't help marrying, any more than you can help dying. It's your fate. But be prepared, that's all, for the one ^{as} much as the other. The romantic sorrows and partings in your courtship are easy to be borne in comparison with the little, wearying, wearying bickerings of married life. Aren't you afraid of *them*?"

"We cannot judge," Philip says, his face full of fun, "until we try them."

"There is a Russian proverb—'Those who wed once wail always.'"

"A Russian bachelor wrote that," laughs Philip. "But, if you object to an Englishman's idea, let me remind you how a Frenchman said, 'There are two lovely things in the world—women and roses.'"

"But not wives and roses. No, when a man marries, he walks blindfold—if he is a working man, into poverty and discomfort, if he is rich, into debt and loneliness."

Philip bows, in a cold, haughty way I never saw in him before.

"If you are rested, dear," he says, in his gentle way, looking at me with, oh, such a contradiction of all this stranger had been saying, "we will go round the gallery."

But suddenly now, because we are going to leave him, the old gentleman seems to me so solitary and so old, that I offer him my hand (for he has said no word against Philip) as I speak to him.

"Even I cannot agree with what you have said," I say, quietly "because, though I have had no experience myself of married life, I know that my own father—though quite poor—was very, very happy."

I suppose it is seeing my eyes fill with tears that makes the old man answer me more disagreeably even than he has spoken at all before.

"Don't drag in past and gone experiences," he says, looking

quite away from us. "If mine is an error—as some one said of his religion—leave me my error."

"I think," Philip says, his voice quite gentle now that he notices a strange trembling in that of the old man, "perhaps you have had too many sad experiences. I am not a very great reader, but somewhere I have seen it said that man fixes the Jacob's ladder into the earth, but woman soars on it up to Heaven. We only follow."

"There, I won't keep you," he says then, with an impatient gesture of the hands. "Go now. I won't keep you."

A strange, slow shadow falls over the old gentleman's face as he says this, and Philip sees it, as well as I. So he speaks again quite cordially, pressing my hand within his arm, as a sort of unspoken apology to me.

"I suppose you prefer staying here. I'm afraid you enjoy silence and solitude best."

"Why should you be afraid?" the stranger inquires, sharply. "Are we all expected to laugh like yourself? A sensible man doesn't laugh if he hears no wit. Good day to you."

His nod of dismissal relieves me greatly, because now we can go without seeming unkind; but once, when I look across the gallery, I find this strange old gentleman watching us intently—watching only us in all the crowd. About an hour afterwards, as Philip and I are standing before a little Kentish landscape, talking of it, and fancying such a spot close to our future home, where we may walk on summer evenings, after our day's work is done, I am surprised to find that the old man has come sauntering up to us.

"That," he says, joining us quite coolly, and pointing to the little painting, "looks a sleepy spot doesn't it?"

"I went down to that Kentish valley lately," Philip says, "to study the wild flowers. It is not more than twenty miles from London, though there is no railway to it. No one ever dies there, or, I should think, ever lies awake. The people all have breakfasted by six; dined by eleven; drunk tea by three; supped by six, and are expected to be fast asleep by eight. They all work out of doors, and the only one thing they are quite sure of, with regard to London, is that no one ever does anything here. 'Who can work indoors?' they say."

My laugh dies in a moment when the old gentleman questions Philip so harshly

"Aren't they right? Look at the holidays you are taking—now in the prime of your life. I am an old man," he goes on, with a change of tone; "you must excuse me, for I would give the world for some of my days—my working days—back."

"We have nothing to excuse," Philip answers, gently, as he

looks down upon the bowed, bent head. "I suppose age gives all of us 'a keener sense of what should be; a greater pain to see what is,'"

"Don't I remind you," the old man asks, with a grim little smile, "of the alderman who entreated a beggar to go away from him, she distressed him so much, because he hadn't her appetite? Now will you have a cup of tea with me? Your little—friend there," he adds, with a smile to Philip, "looks tired. Bless me, you needn't look at her in alarm! A cup of tea will refresh her. Sight-seeing is wearisome work for her, though I daresay, even at home, she doesn't lie in an easy-chair all day. Eh? Come," he goes on, as Philip laughs at the thought of my days being spent in an easy-chair, "I'm as fond of tea as Hazlitt was—as poor Poe was of wine, or Coleridge of opium. There's no harm in it. It will do good to—you both."

Very politely, even gratefully, Philip thanks him and refuses, and I am very glad, yet—though I'm sure I do not know why—I cannot help offering the old man my hand again before we go.

"We have promised to be at home to tea," I say.

"And do you pretend you would not disappoint them at home?"

"No, I would not indeed."

"Then you are a sillier girl even than I thought you."

"Is that possible?" I ask, laughing, laying my other hand on Philip's arm, because I see an angry light in his eyes, and this stranger is so unhappy in his nature, and so old. "Philip," I whisper, as we pass on, "he only speaks without thinking."

"That is no real excuse for a man who is capable of thinking," Philip answers angrily, but presently regains his own natural mood, and speaks compassionate words of the solitary old man, who seems to have no one to make the world joyful for him, and no power to make it so for himself.

Philip is not very willing to let me walk back to the Kingsland Road, but I persuade him at last, and we go merrily along the busy streets. What a scene it is! In the mingled noise of wheels and voices we can scarcely hear each other, and now and then we see a man grinding an organ, while never a note is heard. The lights flare from the open stalls, and it is even a pleasure to see how really picturesquely some of them are arranged. The tiny white plates of whelks upon the fish-stalls lie in the most tempting way on a soft, green bed of parsley, and the glaring lights upon another stall bring brilliant flashes from the penny brooches below. One old man talks uninterruptedly and cheerfully to promiscuous passers-by, without even looking up, as he peels the great onions which are his special merchandise, and,

next to his, a stall of drooping asters try to look bravely up in the artificial light. A group of women gossip earnestly together over the relative merits of two rose-laden caps. The girl who has her barrow filled with watercresses lets possible customers pass her by unnoticed, while she pores over a stray sheet of some torn periodical. Children who surely ought to be in bed stand open-mouthed and open-eyed before a gorgeous display of toys, to which the restless, blazing light must lend for them a strange enchantment. Behind a dangerous pile of florid cups and saucers, a boy sits fast asleep, while his little sister, very wide awake, firmly and patiently refuses to be cajoled by a garrulous old woman into lowering the price of an earthenware teapot. All are busy. There seem to be customers for everything—coal-scuttles and cutlery, books and songs, bags and buttons—but there is most to do of all among the fish and vegetables, and most silence among the books. Philip shows me one place where a man can have his dinner for a penny, and then shows me the tavern where a sailor once told him that they brewed their own Bass. What a little makes us laugh to-day, and how independent we are in these crowded streets! Can anyone ever feel quite as solitary in a country lane as he can in a London street?

"It's always the same," Philip says. "It is always 'the long procession still passing to and fro. The young heart hot and restless, and the old subdued and slow.' Now I must call for the bag, Jeanie; and we will catch the tram."

There are two or three people waiting for the tram-car, and I see in a minute that one of them is our new lodger. He looks eagerly along the road as he stands there, and so does not see us, but the moment Philip recognises him he goes over to him in his friendly, sociable way. Mr. Carden starts a little to see us, and lisps more than ever as he shyly asks us if we are going home now, and then seems to have nothing more to say; but I think that perhaps his silence strikes me the more from its contrast to the uninterrupted arguing of that old gentleman in the museum. Mr. Carden sits very quietly in a corner of the vehicle when we take our seats, his rather thin, grey overcoat buttoned up to the neck, and a great red comforter tied over it. He never speaks at all, though Philip sits next him, and I opposite. The young mother who sits nearest Philip on the other side, looks so weak and tired that I bend over and beg to take her baby for a time. She looks a little astonished, but gives it to me, and, while it falls asleep in my arms, Philip chats, in his pleasant, gentle way, with the mother, and by the time we stop, and I give back her baby, he has brought quite a bright and almost untired look into her face. Mr. Carden follows us out, and we all go home together;

but father tries in vain to persuade our new lodger to have tea with us.

"We are all together, and hungry and cheerful," father says, listening wistfully to the young man's quiet, receding footsteps. "It seems so cheerless for him to go up there alone. I hope I asked him cordially."

"No one could have done it more cordially," Philip says; and we all know that is true.

We are very hungry, Philip and I, yet we have scarcely time to eat, we have so much to hear and to tell. Somehow we always have—all of us—when we have been apart. And then this is such an unusually happy day.

"A day for me always to look back upon," I say to Philip, when he tells me how he has enjoyed it. And to-morrow will be Sunday. Oh, what happy days I shall have to remember!"

CHAPTER VI.

On the following Monday afternoon Lottie goes to school, and I think never but once in my life have I felt prouder than when I see her start off.

"Aunt Charlotte," I say, as I sit near her, sewing and minding the shop, "let us fancy all afternoon that Lottie has gone away for good; then won't her coming home to tea seem splendid? How empty the house feels without her!"

But Aunt Charlotte has fallen asleep, so I sew away in silence. Presently, through the two open doors, I hear upon the pavement a step which in the first moment makes my heart beat as if I knew it, but which in the next sounds strange to me. Yet it pauses at our door, and then, in the early dusk of the foggy winter afternoon, I see Philip's tall form enter the shop.

With my finger on my lips to prevent his waking Aunt Charlotte, I step softly out of the parlour and join him; but he does not come and meet me, he only stands leaning against the counter, with his arms folded, and a strange, hard expression on his face as he looks at me.

"What is it? What do you want me to tell you?" he asks, in a stern, broken way, while I stand before him without questioning. "I have failed of course. Did you ever really think that I should succeed—I? If you did, you are a silly child."

"Then, Philip," I say, as steadily as I can, while I strive after this steadiness so hard that the pressure of my fingers into my palms is real agony, "you will go to America and—get—rich—there."

"Oh, my darling," Philip cries, and all the cruel hardness melts from his eyes, as he draws me close within his arms, "I

have felt a brute all day, hardened by this newest disappointment! I have walked quite twenty miles since the decision was told me this morning, trying to think patiently of it before I saw you. But it got worse and worse, and—knowing it could not be harder even when you knew—I came to tell you. My love, your bravery makes me almost brave, and—less unjust.”

“I suppose, Philip,” I say, keeping back my tears by a great obstinacy, as he calls himself unjust, “that some one else had the post promised him before you saw your old master.”

“No; the post has been given to no one yet; though it is so utterly out of my power, it would be such an opening for me, Jeanie.”

“And why is it utterly out of your power, Philip, yet not filled by anyone else?”

“Because the man who is chosen must—must pay the man who chooses him. Do you understand? He taught me once, he thinks well of my work, and would send me to Worcester with confidence but only if—if I would pay him what he calls a trifle, as a guarantee of my desire both to obtain and keep the appointment.”

“But perhaps if you had told him,” I begin.

“My darling, I told him a hundred things which an hour before I should have fancied myself too proud to mention even to you, and I pleaded as I never pleaded to a man before in all my life. But of what use was it all?” Philip adds, with a weary kind of bitterness. “What was the man’s pity worth to me, and what did my want and anxiety matter to him, while I had not the thirty pounds he required? No, it is all over, Jeanie. Thirty pounds is as utterly beyond my power to give as thirty thousand. And—and so it is all over.”

It is all over. Philip had been with me nearly an hour, and had told me of his plans; and—I think I had talked almost cheerily to him—yet this is all I remember when he leaves me at last, promising to come in and see father as soon as ever he feels able steadily and fairly to discuss his own plans and our separation. It is all over! This hope that he need not leave me for so long; this hope that at last he—so clever at his work, so fond of work, so steady and untiring at it when it is in his power—should begin life in earnest. All over!

CHAPTER VII.

FOR the next few weeks, through everything I do or say or hear, this is my chief consciousness—Philip is preparing to leave me, perhaps for long, long years (though we never allow to each

other that we think it may be so). And each time I see him now there has deepened on his face the shadow of that coming day.

These are rather sad and heavy weeks for us all—or rather they would be but for Lottie's free and real enjoyment, and zest in her new duties. Father meets with no employment, and each day the search for it tells more upon him. If he would but rest himself, and let me do more. I have a copying order on hand now, though, which will bring me something, and to-day I am illuminating a text for an old lady who would not buy the only one we had in stock, because it was not "done by hand." I hope to finish it to-night, but of course I have more to do in the house now, having the rooms upstairs occupied, and Lottie being away and studying so much. I like the work, though. How can women live who have nothing to do but think? Aunt Charlotte grows more hard and querulous every day, and she is never tired of reminding us of the profitable lodger we refused, and the unprofitable one we took—for Mr. Carden has paid us nothing yet.

On the first Saturday night he asked me whether I would oblige him by allowing him to postpone his payment for another week, and of course I willingly did, especially as I thought how very nice and large the double sum would look when I gave it to father. On the second Saturday, when he asked me the same question, I am sure my great disappointment was written plainly on my face.

"I am very sorry to ask you this," he said, with his awkward lisp. "I would not if it were possible to avoid it."

In a moment I was sorry for that unkind hesitation of mine, and I think he read that too.

"The fact is," he said, speaking quite humbly and anxiously, in his rapid way, "I am at present out of employment."

I thought of father, and the tears came slowly into my eyes. How should I like others to behave to father if he were now in lodgings alone?

"I ought to leave these rooms, I know," Mr. Carden went on, fidgeting with a few papers that lay on his table, "that you might let them more advantageously, but still I think, if you will trust me for a time, I shall eventually be enabled to pay you."

He only *thought* he should be able to pay, and *eventually*. Still he had no other home, and no more power to make people give him employment than father had, or than I have to make customers come into the shop. So there were actually tears in my throat which prevented my answering him.

"You want to turn me adrift," he said, as sharply as his lisp would let him, while he stared in my face, "and you are right

enough. Speak to your father about it, and let me know to-morrow what he says." Then he turned abruptly from me, and I was glad to go away.

That night, after I had helped Aunt Charlotte into bed, I went down and told father of Mr. Carden's request, and asked him what I was to say, not letting him see a sign of my own hesitation; only leaving it entirely to him.

"My dear," he said, in his quiet way, "'inasmuch as ye have done it,'—you remember?"

So next day I told Mr. Carden that father said he was willing to wait, and he thanked me—quite gratefully, I daresay, though just in his usually stiff and ceremonious way.

And even yet Mr. Carden has not paid. I wish we could give up minding Aunt Charlotte's bitter innuendoes about our having taken him in at all. Father seems to feel keenly for him, and tries all he can to make him forget he is in our debt. Almost every night father goes up and tries to persuade him to come down and share our bread and cheese supper, or drink tea with us; for it would make so very little difference to us, and it is so solitary up there. But Mr. Carden has never yet come, though I am quite sure that when he is alone he takes only a crust of bread for his own meal. Of course I do not know how he fares during the middle of the day, when he is nearly always away; but in the evening I do not think he ever has yet taken more than that with a cup of tea or coffee; and I have tried various plans to tempt him down, but always unsuccessfully. Once or twice I have made plausible excuses for taking him something up, but I see it always hurts him to accept anything, though he does smile so much, in that monotonous way of his.

Of course it is not hard to me to understand, when I watch father's failing step and unsteady hand, why *he* gets pushed aside in the great battle of City life; but I do wonder very often why it is that our young lodger can get no work to do; for he seems active and untiring in his efforts, and looks shrewd and strong and experienced. Sometimes he and Philip meet in the shop, but I notice that both of them avoid meeting when they can.

"I don't quite understand him," Philip answered simply, when, on first noticing this, I questioned him about it. And I did not mention it to Mr. Carden at all, for it is so plain to see that he always, if he can, evades that honest, direct, and almost questioning glance of Philip's.

But my greatest sorrow now is to see father drooping week by week, while I have no nourishing things to give him.

I think it would be far easier to bear our poverty if it were undoubted and unquestioned, and if we lived in garrets where

no one knew us or came near us, and where we had only bread to eat, and looked for nothing more. There is such a weary strain upon us here. I suppose others feel this strain. I daresay there are other families whom I might see (if I had time to watch) growing shabbier and shabbier day by day, as we do. And—not knowing father himself—how can anyone help looking down upon him, for his worn coat and mended gloves? And indeed are the girls at school much to blame that they laugh at Lottie's homely frocks and hat? We cannot tell how they look from their point of view.

CHAPTER VIII.

I HAVE begun to notice a terrible proof of our growing poverty. One by one the new books (the unsold books, I should say, for we have had them too long, and they are too faded to be called new) disappear from the shelves in the shop. I dare not let father see that I miss them, for I have guessed from the first how they go. They are his books—his only—and, if the small sum for which he sells them, secondhand, in the City, is more needed by him just now than the books themselves, what right have I to complain?

But now at last, sorely against my will, I am obliged to tell Lottie that we are growing poorer and poorer every day. I look away while I tell her, pretending to add up the last week's accounts, because I am so afraid of seeing her burst into tears. But, when she answers me, her eyes are perfectly dry, and as bright as ever, even though her lips shake a little.

"I shall not go to school again, Jeanie."

"Just to-morrow, dear," I urge, for this is Friday.

"To-morrow," she answers, with a great determination that sounds strange in her young voice, "I shall go out—for something else."

So, next morning, she goes out for the first time in her life without letting me know where she is going, and when she comes home, quite late in the afternoon, she has a packet of crochet-cotton in her hand, which she is to make into an antimacassar for a shop in the Kingsland Road. How delighted she is, dear little Lottie! And with what spirit she begins her task there and then! It is an elaborate and difficult pattern that has been given her, and the size is to be unusually large, but none of these things damp her, and I seldom see her with the work out of her fingers until she has tied in the last bunch of fringe, and has shaken out the antimacassar, and exhibited it to us all as a treat; held by her at a safe distance from our little brother's fingers.

But, of all proud moments in Lottie's life, the proudest comes next day, when she brings home her first earnings—two shillings! Mr. Carden is in the shop when she darts in, and he stands, and listens and looks, while she shows me the money. Then he asks her quite coolly—poor little Lottie, how hard it must be to hear the question from him!—why she has left off going to school.

"I would rather crochet," she says, in her soft, bright tones; and he—as, indeed, well he may—stares at her rather curiously.

He knows almost everything that goes on in the house, and it seems natural that he should know this. A few minutes after his indifferent question to her, he is congratulating her on the two shillings in the heartiest way, and just exactly proving that he, too, understands the value of two shillings.

He is always very careful and economical himself. Every morning, before he goes out, he makes his rooms so neat, and dusts them himself so carefully, that I can scarcely find anything to do there. He even makes his own bed, and sometimes, when I go into the neat, empty rooms, there is something utterly pathetic to me in their perfect cleanliness and order. He never will have a fire lighted for his return, and, occasionally, when he has found one awaiting him—for it is so very cheerless in this winter weather to come home to a fireless room—he apologises most humbly for the trouble and expense to which he puts us. Aunt Charlotte says these fires have made a distinct increase in our expenditure, but father never forbids me to put them.

It is a bitter night, and father has come home from the City so utterly worn out that I beg him earnestly to go to bed; and after long persuasion I succeed. Yet each time I go in to him, I find him wide awake, and, when at last I take in a light and a glass of brandy and hot water, I see his face all wet with tears.

"Jeanie, Jeanie, you should not have brought me this," he says. "We—you know it, dear, as well as I do—we want all our sixpences for daily bread."

"This is daily bread, father, when you will eat no other," I assert, putting the glass into his hand.

"But—how long can we go on, Jeanie?"

"We have abundance for to-morrow, dear; and the next day will be all right when it comes."

"When it comes," he echoes, softly.

CHAPTER IX.

AUNT CHARLOTTE and Lottie have both gone to bed when I leave father's room, but I do not follow them, because I think

this such a good opportunity for doing a little of Lottie's crochet. I put out the gas in the parlour, light a candle for my work, and sit there at the table until my candle has burnt to its socket. I must have worked quite three hours, for it is one o'clock now.

Ever since Mr. Carden came to us I have noticed that he has had no gas burning after ten o'clock, on any night at all, so it surprises me greatly to-night when, as I go upstairs, I see his sitting-room door wide open, and a blaze of gaslight issuing from it. It strikes me in a moment that Mr. Carden has gone to bed and forgotten the lights! What a pity!

I rap upon the open door, just as a form, and, of course, am not surprised when no answer comes. Then I pass on into the room to turn off the gas. Just within the door I pause, in a blank bewilderment, which changes slowly to real pain and fear. The room is not empty, yet our young lodger is not there. In his easy-chair another gentleman lies asleep, a slight, thin, elderly gentleman, with a colourless, unbearded face, and scanty grey hair entirely gone from the temples. He is dressed in a tight blue coat with a good many rather large gilt buttons, tight black trousers, and a high velvet waistcoat.

Presently, while something in the sleeping face puzzles me most unaccountably, I recognise the things that lie upon another chair close beside him, even in the fuller light of the gas; the loose grey suit, without which I have never seen Mr. Carden before; the grey felt hat; a thickly-curling brown head of hair, strangely familiar to me; an open rouge-box; and the umbrella with the bull's head on the handle.

I turn my eyes again (they are literally aching in their wide bewilderment) upon the sleeping face. Yes, with the red cheeks, with the broad smile, the curling hair all over the bare forehead and temples, this would be the face of our young lodger. And yet—is it not the face of that old gentleman who talked so bitterly to Philip and to me in the museum at Bethnal Green? Yet how different the dress is! What does it mean?

It seems to me as if I must have stood for hours rooted to that spot, with my fixed wondering stare at the unfamiliar face, before I turn away in my perplexity, closing the door noiselessly behind me before I go on to my own room.

I have spent many wakeful nights before—many, in spite of my youth and health and good appetite—but never one like this, when the house seems to me full of mystery and cunning and deceit—my dear old home!—and when it seems so impossible to me to see what I ought to do.

How it will grieve and disappoint poor father to hear that our

lodger is not what he seems to be! Yet father ought to know. Yes; I must tell him; but—ah, no, it need not be quite yet!

What can be Mr. Carden's reason for having recourse to this disguise? I can never again wonder why he has not met with an engagement, for must there not be some unexplainable chasm in his past?

Yet I have seen no hypocrisy or cunning on that sleeping face, as I have seen none all these weeks in the young man's blue eyes and ready smile; just as I cannot even see them next morning, Mr. Carden passes through the shop as usual, with his bow and smile for me. No, though I look searchingly at him, and though at last I note such an effort in his lisping tones that I wonder how I ever thought it the natural voice of a young man.

Again and again this day, Lottie questions me about my absent manner, and in the evening I catch father glancing now and then anxiously across at me; but it is so pleasant to have him with us to-night as usual that I cannot tell him of my discovery yet. Then Philip comes in, and tries to cheer us all—poor Philip! So could I be the one to throw a chill among them?

Next morning, while I sit behind the counter, sewing as swiftly as I can at an immense housewife I am making for Philip, a man comes hurriedly into the shop, as if time were excessively valuable to him, and lays down on the counter before me one of a heap of printed hand-bills, which he seems to be distributing very industriously. I nod in recognition of the act, and watch him bustle out of the shop and on up the street; then, without dropping my work, I read the bill from where I sit.

Two minutes afterwards I have it tightly hidden in my hand, and am running to my own room, leaving the shop to chance. I lock my door, spread the paper on the bed, kneel down and read it again and again—twenty times at least. I read it till not only do I know the words by heart, and not only do they seem to be repeating themselves to me in the silence, but they even shine before my eyes in the clear daylight, while I try miserably and fruitlessly to disentangle my hurrying, changing thoughts.

Yet at last when Lottie summons me, and I open my door and go back to my simple daily tasks, there still reach my heart, more clearly than her words do, those words upon the printed hand-bill which I have locked so carefully away.

“ONE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD!—Missing, and supposed to be hiding for private purposes in London, a gentleman of fifty years of age; height, about five feet five inches; thin, with a stoop in the shoulders, blue eyes, and very pale complexion; has a lisp, and speaks in an uncertain, rapid tone of voice. When

last seen, he wore a dark blue dress-coat with bright buttons, and high black velvet waistcoat. Had with him a small hair trunk, and an umbrella with a bull's head carved on the handle. —Whoever shall send to Messrs. Lloyd, of Staple's Inn, such information as shall lead to his capture, shall receive the above reward."

CHAPTER X.

OH, if I could only see clearly even to-day what I ought to do, what would be wise and right to do, and above all, what would be kind and pitiful! If the paper had but chanced to fall into my hands before that night when I went into the sitting-room and saw our lodger asleep without his disguise! Then I should never have connected the two, and should have destroyed and forgotten the paper.

All through this day I go about as if in a dream. Everyone of my daily tasks is done as we do things in a dream. I have decided now that it will be right to tell father—but that I need tell only father. So as the evening comes, I listen anxiously for his step. No wonder Aunt Charlotte scolds me for being restless and unsettled. No wonder Lottie's gaze follows me curiously. No wonder even the little boys ask me again and again what is the matter. No wonder; for every minute, as I listen for father's step, I am praying in my heart that he may come before Mr. Carden. I grow to think he will never come, and every effort of mine to be at ease is but a sorry failure. I take the children to bed, and talk to them as usual, but they do not beg me to stay with them to-night, as they always do. Every shop in the street—except our own—is closed when I come down, and the street lamps give but a feeble light; yet the time goes on, and father does not come. I walk restlessly backwards and forwards, between the street door and the parlour fireside where Aunt Charlotte sits fretting, until at last she grows so tired of complaining that she lets me take her to bed.

When—in coming downstairs again—I pass the empty rooms on the first floor, a strange fear holds me, as fear never held me before, and I can scarcely bear to give Lottie the order Aunt Charlotte sent, that she was at once to follow her to bed. When Lottie is gone the house feels empty and desolate as it never felt before; yet I have often sat up for hours after everyone else was gone to bed.

I make a bargain with a boy who passes, to put up the shutters for me for twopence; but I keep the door open, and stand just

within it, waiting there; for I cannot bear the loneliness and silence of the house any longer, and now and then I go out and look along the dim street.

At last, as I stand watching, I see father coming slowly towards me; not as he ever came before, but walking shrinkingly close to the house.

Without a moment's hesitation I run to meet him, and give him my arm, feeling so much stronger than he is, as well as so inexpressibly thankful that he is with me at last, his dear, icy hand so tightly held in mine.

As we enter the lighted shop, he looks up and scans my face with a dumb, wistful questioning; but, as I do not understand it, I can only smile, as if nothing could possibly be better than it is, and tell him again how glad I am that he has come at last. But, when we have reached the parlour, and I have stirred the fire into a blaze, and drawn his chair up to it, he asks me, in a quick, half whisper, if anyone is in the house besides ourselves.

I know he does not mean besides himself and me; I somehow know quite well *what* he means. How can I help it, when his dim eyes rest upon mine in such fear? I am standing by him with a cup of coffee, when I presently ask the question, just as if I had not known.

"Who do you expect, father?"

He looks up into my face as if he were going to answer, and then suddenly his tired head falls into his hand, and he begins to sob. How terrible this is to me, he shall never know.

I set the cup down quietly, and, with my arms around him, I kiss him again and again; but I can say nothing—I can do nothing. He is worn and feeble and despondent, and now a great humiliation is on its way to us and to him; but I can give him neither strength, nor rest, nor help.

"ONE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD!"

The words start up before my eyes, and my thoughts hold them, half dazzled and frightened. One hundred pounds will make father a strong and hopeful man again. One hundred pounds will make us free from care, as we used to be. One hundred pounds will take away this hair-suspended sword above us. One hundred pounds will give Philip the life he longs for, and keep him with us. Ah, one hundred pounds will save us all!

"Jeanie, things have reached a crisis now, and everything we have must go."

I hear father's low and heavy words distinctly, yet other words are still before my eyes, and echoing, in my ears.

"Father,"—I am on my knees before him, and my eyes eagerly

and longingly are reading his—"one hundred pounds would save us all, wouldn't it?"

He answers only with the faintest, dreamiest smile, because he thinks I am touching wild impossibilities.

"Would it, father? Would one hundred pounds save us all?"

"Half of it, Jeanie. Even one quarter of it would take us over Christmas. But, Jeanie dear, if it were one thousand, it could not be farther beyond our reach."

"Oh, father, we could have the money if—if you say that——"

I cannot finish the sentence. I dare not say a word to influence him. I dare only tell him simply what has happened, and leave it all to him.

Then, with a strange catching in my breath, I wait for his answer. It comes at last, just in his usual patient tones, though his cheeks have flushed so feverishly while I was speaking.

"Jeanie, there is no word in the bill of crime or fraud?"

"No, father."

"I could not suspect it; could you, Jeanie?"

"No, father."

"Then we need not betray him. Our house is his home now, and—we could not take this money, could we, Jeanie? He is poor, like ourselves. Life is a struggle for him, as it is for us. Dear, can we spend these toilsome, disappointing days without knowing what such days are like to others? Can we know what it is to be weary and hungry and heartsick, and not give a shelter, if we can, to one who may be weary and hungry and heartsick too?"

"But the one hundred pounds?"

I say it slowly, as if I longed for the money; yet there is a great lightening of my heart on hearing my father answer.

"Jeanie, your decision is my own, I know. We will not save ourselves at the expense of others. Presently perhaps it will be all less hard for us. Soon work must come to me, I think, because I try so hard. And I can work, dear, though I am old—and a little failing now."

"Old," I whisper, with his hands tight in mine, and my eyes filled with tears. "Why, father, a year's prosperity would make you strong again! It is only denial and fatigue and disheartenment. Oh, father,"—as, like a stab, I feel that greater suffering and privation are in store for him than he has ever yet known—"take the hundred pounds!"

"My child," he answers, softly drawing my head down upon his breast, that I may not look any more into his face, "would that be having compassion one of another?"

The key is put into the front door at that minute, and then a

slow step comes along the passage. Every sound seems so strangely loud and distinct to me to-night that this step sounds like a disturbance of all the quiet of the house. I rise hurriedly to my feet, because, instead of going straight upstairs as usual, Mr. Carden has come into the parlour, without even pausing at the door.

"I look in to apologise for being so late," he says, glancing quite inquisitively from father to me, but with his usual broad smile. "I was detained in Chelsea, and then I made a stupid mistake in the train. I positively believe I have been two hours coming home."

"Jeanie," father says—and I quite understand why, after having just heard my story, it is easier for him to address me than our lodger—"he must be very tired and cold. Persuade him to try a little of your nice warm coffee, dear."

"Not to-night," he says. Of course I am relieved, because I have made only just what father himself ought to drink; but I certainly think his reply a little curter than it need be. "I will try it another time. Good night."

And he goes away without closing the door, while father glances involuntarily and deprecatingly at me. Then he tries, poor father, in a sudden, uncertain manner, to talk of old times—the old, old times before his marriage, where Mr. Carden's name could have no possible place.

CHAPTER XI.

FATHER does not attempt to leave home next morning, but he walks restlessly and nervously about the rooms, and seems ever to be listening for some expected voice or step. Aunt Charlotte reproaches him a good deal, but he scarcely seems to hear what she says. At last, late in the afternoon, his restlessness almost suddenly leaves him, and he sits down close to the parlour fire, stooping very much, and gazing wearily into it, but, as I can plainly see, still listening for the expected sound. Lottie runs for the kettle, and I lay the table for tea—an early tea will do us all good, and rouse father from his dreary watching.

But before the tea is ready, and while the gas in the shop is still unlighted, I see Philip enter and walk quietly to the counter, almost as if he were a customer. Somehow, without understanding why, my heart sinks as I go softly up to him, and take both his hands in mine.

"I am going, Jeanie," he says, drawing one hand away, and throwing down upon the counter the half of a railway-ticket which he has been holding. "I have had that given me to-day. It is the return half of a Liverpool ticket, and I cannot afford

to waste it. I need not have gone till to-morrow; I might have had another evening with you; but this might decide me. A Liverpool man I used to know has come to London on business, and been detained, so he gave me that ticket, and—I must go.”

I can feel how all the life and colour have left my face, and I wish the shop were darker still, that Philip might not see; but yet I do not think that anything could make his eyes look sadder than they do.

“The parting has come in earnest now,” he says, putting his hand up to his throat, as if it hurt him when he speaks. “Jeanie, for Heaven’s sake, let it be soon over!”

And yet he holds me—ah, so tightly now!—and his eyes seem as if they could not leave my face again. What a terrible thing it is, this double sorrow! The sorrow for ourselves I almost think just now is swallowed up in the misery of each other’s sorrow.

“Oh, my love,” he says, with one strong, tearless sob, “I never thought that this farewell would be so hard! I thought I had prepared myself for it. I thought that the long fear of our parting was as bad as the real parting could be. And now—oh, Jeanie, Jeanie, when I shall look in vain for your dear face——”

“I shall never seem to look in vain for yours, Philip,” I whisper, trying so hard to win a little courage now; “for I shall see you everywhere. I shall hear the voice I love in every silence. I—I can never feel very far away from you, Philip.”

“That thought,” says Philip, rather huskily, “shall give me strength. My perfect happiness is to be near you, Jeanie. Oh, in your heart, will you keep me near you always—always?”

I could keep him near me, not in my heart only; I could give him the work he loved, and the home which he and I had so happily anticipated; I could make this exile unnecessary; I could lay my fingers upon his lips as this miserable “Good-bye” falters past them, and could bring the old happiness into his face again, the old content into his heart; I could do all this, if——

“ONE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD!”

Oh, if the words would but cease their ringing in my ears! If I could but for one moment shut them from my dazed and aching eyes!

“Jeanie,” Philip cries, breaking this pained silence of mine, “speak to me. I see your great pity for me, but the farewell must come; and no words—no words of yours, my dearest—can be so hard to bear as my own painful thoughts.”

And now a little courage comes to me. I look up into my dear Philip’s sad, pale face, and I tell him—not so brokenly as I feared as I should speak—that I know all will be well

presently; that we have no need to fear separation, because we shall be so true to each other; that our hearts will always seem to be one, though half the world may lie between us for a time; and that when we meet again these hard days will be over.

"Hard days!" Philip echoes, very cheerlessly. "They have all to come. Could I have thought any days hard while you were near me, Jeanie; while I could take your helpful little hand in mine, or—oh, my darling——" He breaks off, taking my head upon his breast and bending his above it. "All the hard, bitter days are yet to come; for after this I shall not have your smile to comfort me, your kiss to make me strong. My love, my love, how can fate be so cruel?"

I draw back a little shyly from his embrace. This is not like my brave, true-hearted lover. And I too am changing. What right have I to tremble and complain, when I am so blessed in Philip's love, and when he has health and strength, and leaves me only for a little time?

"Jeanie," Philip says, seeming to read something new in my face, "forgive me. You are right. It will all be well at last. What ought I to fear, my dearest, while you are true to me? How brave the little pale face is! Turn your eyes away, my dear one, for I cannot bear their trusting steadfastness. And yet it gives me courage, too, to meet them. It was terrible when I told you first, and they grew wide and sad with fear. Oh, Jeanie, if we could but have gone together! I tried so hard to win work here—I wonder could any man have tried more earnestly and industriously—yet it all failed. I seem so helpless in the great world. Yet there should be room for us all."

"Philip," I whisper, stroking his lined and troubled face, and not so much afraid of trusting myself to utter some one else's words, as those which come from my own faint heart, "do you remember once showing me these words? I remember them so well.

'What I do now, thou canst not understand;
Trust Me 'tis best and right;
Hereafter to thy sight
And shall unveil itself as wisely planned.'

There is a little silence, and then Philip once more folds me in his arms, but with such a different strength now—the strength of courage, not despair; of steadfastness not passion.

"I remember," he says, quite firmly, though in rather a pausing way, "and I will remember. Jeanie, I will not come back to you such a coward as I leave you to-day. A man in a great measure shapes his own life, doesn't he? And mine shall be—my dear one, what can it not be if, as you yourself have said, we live in what loves us?"

Then in a low, rather shaken voice, Philip tells me of the journey he will take to-night; of his preparations; of how I must bid good-bye to the others for him, because he dares not go in among them and again find himself in the dear old room where he has been so happy; of how he will write; and——

Ah, I cannot hear it all; for I am struggling weakly to believe that this is a dream, and that presently I shall awake to see Philip near me still, with the glad, tender smile with which he always greets me; and to hear him laugh and tell me the happy thought of these last days was true, and that he is not going!

Then——then I know indeed I am not dreaming. Philip's last long kiss is not like a dream. My own hand-clasp has an agony sleep never knew. Our words break off in a pain too keen for utterance. I cannot bear another glance into Philip's face. I cover my eyes, and stand quite still, only my heart trembling. When I look up, he will not be there. He speaks to me once more, and then he sees that I dare not lift my eyes till he has gone. Once again, tenderly and closely he holds me in his arms, kissing the hands that cover my poor face. Then I hear a step, quite unlike Philip's, cross the shop, and I know I am alone. Must I uncover my eyes, and see my world so empty?

"Jeanie, come and make Aunt Charlotte a special slice of toast."

I go at once in answer to Lottie's summons, and the next minute I am very glad, for I hear Mr. Carden's soft, slow step enter the shop and loiter there. I dare not go back and light the gas, for fear of his seeing my eyes. Father still sits silent beside the fire, bending over it in a feeble, shrinking way which goes to my heart. Yet I dare not make the room cheerful with light, because it might shock him so to look at me——just yet. I try to talk, but my words are so unsteady, and so low that I stop them with a burning rush of crimson in my cheeks. Am I to be so weak and useless now that Philip has gone? Does not life hold the same duties for me that it held yesterday?

"Father," I whisper, in a new yearning to be near to him, "we are altogether now, and——father, dear, why do you start? What did you hear?"

"Listen! Whose step is that?"

I see the fear upon his face, that this is the step for which he has been listening all this grievous day, and I can only silently kiss his wan, raised face. But, ah, from the first moment I knew whose step it was, and I press my hand upon my heart, trying to still its beating! Dare I meet Philip again, when I know what agony will follow in another farewell? Lottie has recognised the step now, and has gone without hesitation into the shop.

"Philip," she says, through the gloom, "will you light the gas for me?"

I hear her easy, natural question, and then Philip's low and hurried tones. Then there is a silence, the gaslight bursts on us all, and—Lottie calls me.

"Jeanie," Philip says, while I look piteously into his white, tired face, "I left my ticket here. Have you taken it away?"

He is searching hurriedly even as he speaks, opening every book or folded paper on the counter, stooping and seeking on the floor on both sides of it. And I hunt too, in silence.

"What ticket is it?" Lottie asks, turning the gas still higher.

I hear Philip explaining, going on with his search the while; and then, quite suddenly, she bursts into childish, passionate crying.

"My dear," he says, soothing and quieting her, like the brother he has always been to her, "I shall soon be at home again, very soon. And you have Jeanie."

But now—born, I think, in the shock of my little sister's sudden grief, and of the consciousness that father is coming to us, and will suffer too—a strange, involuntary resolution seizes me.

"Philip," I whisper, not caring how he looks into my eyes now, for they are piteously pleading with him, "your ticket is lost, and you cannot go to-night. Oh, forget it, Philip, just for this one evening, and come and cheer us all! We are so unhappy, Philip. Father is so sad to-day, and he fears—Oh, my dear, stay just one day!"

"Love," he answers in intense and quiet earnestness, "if my ticket had *not* been lost, your entreaty would have kept me. Let the ticket go. I can walk to Liverpool in time, but this evening I may never have again. Dear, I will take this happiness instead."

So we go back into the parlour, almost cheerfully—Lottie quite cheerfully—and we do not lower the gas again, because we say it will cheer father to see the shop look so bright and comfortable. Then Philip lights the parlour gas, and makes himself one of us in a moment, as he can always so easily and brightly do, talking especially to Aunt Charlotte, as if he felt that the only cloud lay there, and he will scatter it if he can.

When tea is quite ready, and everything looking bright and cheerful, I come up behind father's chair, and whisper to him,

"May I ask Mr. Carden down to tea, father? He has been loitering about the house all day, and has asked for nothing. He even has had no fire."

"Will there be enough for—for you all?" father asks, with a new pitiful hesitation, as he looks round at the table.

"Plenty for us all, and for him," I answer, cheerfully, for there

is plenty, such as it is. However bare the table may be in the morning, or at mid-day, we never let it be so at night, when father is at home. So, when I tell him this, he seems very glad to let me go and invite our lodger. As I leave the room, I turn, and give a look around it. We have made it so warm and bright to-night! The little boys are both close to father, talking merrily. Philip is—well, just at this moment he is looking after me with a smile. Lottie is joining in the talk as she leans over the back of Aunt Charlotte's big easy-chair; and even Aunt Charlotte is listening without a complaint. This room is the very heart of home to me, and holds all I love, so no wonder the picture—though so simple and so bare of elegance or abundance—is very beautiful to me.

Mr. Carden is writing busily when I enter his chilly room, but he puts down his pen while he listens to father's message.

"Your father sent you, did he?" he asks me, rather sceptically. "How many of you are downstairs?"

"We are all there," I answer, "and Philip Aston."

Why will the colour always come so vividly into my face when Mr. Carden mentions Philip to me, or I mention Philip to Mr. Carden? It is just as if I minded that searching look he gives me.

"Do come, Mr. Carden," I urge, the coldness of his solitary room striking dismally upon me in contrast to the one I have left, "Do—we all wish it so much."

"Has Mr. Aston decided to go abroad in his penniless condition?"

"There is nothing else for him to do," I answer, unwillingly.

Taking up his pen again, he thanks me, but will not come to-night, he says. Then when by another plea I oblige him to look up once more and answer me, he does it even with a broader and more lengthy smile than usual, which makes me feel quite sure that he has seen the handbills, and not only is afraid of dropping his disguise, but even of leaving his room. So I hasten downstairs that I may bring him up a little tray of tea for himself. At the parlour door Philip meets me, and in his pitying glance I read *something* which—though it makes my heart beat so fast, and prepares me for another sorrow—instead of making me a coward, makes me almost strong to go on into the room that had been so bright and happy when I looked back upon it as the heart of home. All its peaceful homeliness seems gone. The loving voices that made its atmosphere so pleasant are silent. The loving faces that brightened it are shadowed now. Aunt Charlotte is crying noisily; Lottie has taken the boys to the far end of the room; and father, leaning for support on the chair from which he has risen, is listening with bent head, while a strange man speaks to him rather fast and loud. I have never

seen the man before, but of course I know in a moment for what he has come. Even if I had not learnt from father to be expecting him, I should have read it all just then in poor father's attitude. In a moment I am beside him, my hand slipped through his arm.

"Come, father, tea is waiting. I did my best, but Mr. Carden will not come."

I suppose it is a relief to them all to hear my homely voice, and to see me pass by this man as if he were not there; for somehow it seems as if the oppression were lifted a little and the atmosphere a shade less miserable.

Father comes to the table with me almost mechanically, while the strange man draws up a chair for himself at the fire.

"I'll trouble you to rise a moment," Philip says—and this is the first time I have ever heard him speak haughtily and authoritatively—and, when the man rises, Philip places his chair for him quite away from the hearth.

"Now, Aunt Charlotte," he says, giving her his arm; and, for the first time for years, she leaves her fireside chair, and joins us at the table.

Father notices this in a moment, and smiles, and lays his hand on hers with a kind of unspoken congratulation. Lottie looks across at Philip, and nods her thanks to him for achieving this; but Philip only throws a meaning glance behind him, at the man, to indicate that it is his proximity which has influenced Aunt Charlotte.

Philip scarcely touches his tea, and as soon as he can he rises. He must see if anything can be done, he says to me, in a troubled, feverish way.

Then he turns to the man, and in a strange, quite pleasant way, tempts him out into the shop, and chats with him there, and at last leaves him sitting at the counter like a customer, with the *Echo* in his hand.

Then we have a long, quiet talk, broken by heavy pauses; but we find there is nothing we can do to stop our fall.

"It will be very hard upon you, Charlotte," poor father says. And then Aunt Charlotte, who has been crying all the time, stops her tears, and moans in her misery.

"Father, the hundred pounds would save us!"

It does not sound like my voice whispering these words, yet I feel them rush from my heart and from my lips, rapidly and feverishly; and I hold them in my thoughts closely, as we hold the love of life.

Father turns, as if listening to a voice he did not recognise, and then, with a long indrawn breath, he shakes his head slowly.

"Jeanie, that was scarcely your own thought, my child.

Would you bring worse upon him than we have to bear ourselves? He too will be turned adrift when we are."

As father speaks, a sudden thought flashes into my mind. What may not this turning adrift be to the stranger upstairs, if he is not warned in time? Without allowing myself a moment's hesitation, I run softly up to my room, and, unlocking my own private drawer, take the printed handbill from it. Then, with it hidden in my hand, I enter Mr. Carden's room, close the door behind me, and go up to him where he sits at the table, still writing. I am a little out of breath, and I know my cheeks are pale and my lips unsteady, so no wonder he looks up at me with real astonishment. But he waits in silence for what I have to say—I am quite used now to his not rising as Philip does while I stand.

"Mr. Carden," I say—and I am sure I look frightened enough even to frighten him, yet he sits and waits and listens unmoved—"there is a man downstairs—you understand? He will stay till—till all we have is taken away. If there is any—any reason why you, or—or your luggage, should not be—recognised, won't it be safer for you to go away first—now? If it will be unsafe—please try to understand me!—for you, or anything of yours to be seen here, please go into safety to-night, or early in the morning. I will arrange it, if you—will be ready."

He has listened to me without a movement of face or figure, and he does not even speak when I pause. But his eyes are lowered from my face—I think, in his surprise and fear.

"Never mind about the rent," I go on, hurrying my words, partly in pity for him, partly in my own nervousness. "Father does not mind, only—only please go if there is danger for you in staying here. I will make it easy for you. You need not tell me what time you choose. I shall not go to bed to-night, and it will be—all right. Go softly, and, even if I do not hear, I will be sure to make all fast after your departure. Oh, I hope you understand!"

He speaks at last, coldly and stiffly.

"What right have you to suspect me?"

"It is no question of suspicion, Mr. Carden."

"Does that man whom you are going to marry suspect me too?"

Ah, it is such a cold and solitary room, and he has so much to fear! Though my pulses quicken, my passion cannot live in the face of the misery that I know now is in store both for ourselves and him.

"Philip knows you only as our lodger. He knows of no debt of yours to us, and suspects no cause for your—concealment. He never could."

"And your father?" Mr. Carden goes on, still quite unmoved,

it seems to me. "Does he suspect me too? Was it he who sent you to me now?"

"No! I came of my own accord. Father is too much troubled just now to feel more than sorrow at the thought of your being turned from home—as we shall be."

"He said that, did he? And the old lady, your aunt?"

"She is only crying." And now I too am crying in a very passion of misery, hard as I try to help being a baby in this man's presence.

"*That* helps you greatly, doesn't it," he asks, in his iciest way; "with those three children too? Now tell me how you came to suspect me, for I know you do, even if no one else in the house does."

For my answer, I put the printed paper, folded as it was, down upon the table beside him.

"No one has seen it," I say trembling, "but myself and father. Keep it, please. Your—your secret is quite safe with us."

"Stop!" he cries, suddenly and quite loudly, as I turn away.

"Why are you hurrying away? Tell me"—his tones grow even sharper with each word—"whether you have friends to go to?"

"No."

He is putting the paper unopened into his pocket—knowing so well, of course, what it contains—and there is no touch of pity in his voice.

"No friends? Why has your father made himself no friends to help him in his need?"

"You have no right to question me so!" I say, looking fiercely at him through my tears.

"No, no right," he answers a little less ungently. "I only thought it so strange that your father, who seems to have many good qualities, should have no friend to help him in such a time as this. Your little sister told me once she had an uncle somewhere. Surely you can go to him?"

"No," I say, but of course I will not utter to this stranger a word against my own father's brother.

"Has he behaved badly to you or to your father, then?"

"I have never known him, and father never speaks of him."

"He is not a scamp then?" Mr. Carden asks, still in his stony way.

"Certainly not; he is my father's brother"—for would I let this stranger into the secrets which father has always kept so sacredly, even from us? "Now, Mr. Carden, will you bid me good-bye?"

"But," he says, rising at last, "tell me where to find you if I come back."

"I cannot," I say, brokenly. "I do not know. And you may

—not come. I hope you have somewhere you can go. I—I wish it were different for—you, as well as for us all. Please say good-bye and—remember, it will be quite safe for you to pass out—to-night; and—and your secret is very safe with us; very safe.”

“I will prepare to go, as you advise, but I will not say good-bye to you alone. I will call in and say it to you all together.”

I tell him in a troubled way (for somehow, strange as it may seem, I am almost as troubled for him to-night as for ourselves—quite indeed, for is he not alone and in hiding, and have we not each other ?) that it will not be wise. But he says nothing more to me, and as I leave the room I see him at once open the little hair trunk and begin to pack.

CHAPTER XII.

WE try our best, all of us, to make this evening seem like other evenings, but of course we fail. The strange man keeps his seat in the shop till about nine o'clock, when I miss him. I know he can only have gone to the tavern a few doors off, but I am still delighted that the house should be free of him even for those few minutes. The children go to bed now, but father still plods patiently through the shop-books, groping for some way out of our difficulty. Philip has not returned to us yet, and, though I try not to think of it, Lottie whispers to me how tired he will be, because he had had a hard day's walking before he started. Lottie herself is crocheting without a pause, just as if she felt that we were all dependent on her fingers now. I am helping father—at least, trying to make the accounts smooth and straightforward to him. So another hour goes by, and then Aunt Charlotte tells me I may help her upstairs. I try my best to tempt her to take something before she goes, but she is low and spiritless, and will not listen to me.

“Steven,” she asks, pausing beside father on her way, “is there no way for us out of this trouble.”

Father looks up. His grey hair is pushed from his haggard face, but there is for her the shadow of his old smile still.

“Only by passing through it, my dear.”

“Where are we to sleep to-morrow night? In the streets?”

“I hope not, Charlotte, I hope not. But don't let us live through the troubles of to-morrow till they come. We shall bear them then, Heaven helping us.”

“But we may not be able,” she says, not bitterly now so much as sadly; and then she lays her hand on father's shoulder. “Steve”—ah, I can see by his face that this name, from her lips,

carries him, swift as thought, to those old times he never speaks of!—"you needn't try to make light of it to me. All your life you have tried to make troubles lighter for us all. I ought now to be softening this for you."

He cannot speak—poor father—in his glad surprise. He takes Aunt Charlotte's hand from his shoulder, and holds it in his. She understands, just as he understands the change this evening has shown him in her.

"From to-night," she says, softly, "I will try—Heaven helping me, as you say, Steve—to be different."

When I have left Aunt Charlotte in bed, and very gratefully returned the unusually gentle kiss she gives me, I creep into Lottie's room, where she stands in the dark, crying pitifully, with her head in her hands.

"Oh, Jean," she sobs, without uncovering her wet eyes, "after to-night what shall we do, homeless, penniless?"

I am not a bit more brave and trusting than she is, so we can only cry together in the darkness there, just for those few minutes which we can spare to be together where we need not hide our sorrow.

The little boys are wide awake when I go noiselessly into their room, and to-night their arms close round me, as if they were afraid to let me go.

As I go down the lower stairs, Philip comes up one or two and meets me, and, though it is dark and I cannot see his face, I know at once by his step that he has met with only disappointment.

"I cannot borrow the money, Jeanie," he says hurrying to tell me, but holding me the while so tenderly and protectingly that he tells me thus unspokenly how he would guard me, if he could, from hardship such as this. "I have tried everyone I know, and cannot. Now I am going to your landlord, just to—just to—" Philip repeats, trying to speak quite airily of this new and futile idea—"just to put a case to him. I saw a light in his windows as I passed, so I shall find him. Will you wait up for me for half an hour? Oh, my love, if I could but bear all this for you! I thought my own disappointments and privations hard to bear, but they seem nothing now when I feel what it may be to leave you unsettled and—in need."

"Philip," I whisper, nervously unclasping his hands from about me, as a door above us softly opens—for I know that Mr. Carden is coming to make his escape, and I know Philip far too well to fear that he will misconstrue me—"please go. I will wait up for you if you are all night away. Let me bolt the door behind you. Oh, how I always miss you, Philip!"

A minute afterwards he has gone out into the almost quiet street, and I have closed the door as loudly as I can, that Mr. Carden, if he is listening and waiting, may feel quite sure the way is clear for him now.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN I join father again, he is still at his close examination of the accounts, and the strange man has not returned. While I gently draw the books away, and coax him from his futile work, I am aware that some one enters the room behind me, and comes up to father's side. I know Mr. Carden's step, and I remember how he had said he should come in and bid us all good-bye. So, feeling what a cold and comfortless departure this must be for him, and also how important it is that we should not detain him for fear of the bailiff's return, I turn at once from father, and smile a sort of welcome for this poor and solitary lodger of ours.

But the smile dies a sudden death on my lips; my hands seize on father's chair; and there comes a sudden pain across my forehead, in this new intense surprise. It is our lodger who comes up to father's side, and yet it is not. It is some one I have seen before, and yet a stranger. It is a small old gentleman, with thin grey hair and blue eyes—like father's own; and a pale, earnest face—like father's own! The familiar, quiet room reels round me, and two voices—both familiar, quiet voices—seem to reach me from a long, long distance.

"Dolf!"—"Steve!"

"Am I dreaming, Dolf?"

"No, I am come back—to be forgiven and to save you, brother Steve."

One day, thousands of years ago, two brothers met again who had parted years before in anger; and, when the younger fell upon his brother's neck and kissed him, they both wept. Remembering this, what brothers now need feel it shame to meet again with tears and kisses?

"Steve"—it must be a long time afterwards, for the words are distinct in my ears now, and the two faces clear before my eyes,—
"you have more to forgive than that cruelty and injustice of twenty years ago. You have this last deception to forgive me. I will explain that, Steve, presently, when I have told you of my coming home. It is only lately that my eyes were first opened—so completely had Murray duped and blinded me—to the real nature of that so-called friend who had monopolised the place of my own brother. But, after having been warned once, and having detected the selfish, mercenary motive, it was very easy to read a course of lies and deceit. While we had been out in

Australia together, the capital I took (leaving you penniless, Steve, as I remember only too bitterly) had made us both rich men. Murray needed my co-operation no longer, so did not care to guard the deception, or with any care disguise his selfish, grasping nature. At any rate, it all grew so plain to me that I was lost in wonder how I could ever have been blinded by his lying misrepresentations—as we do wonder, you know, Steve, when the scales have fallen from our eyes. I knew then how I had been duped, how entirely, from the first, the fault had been on my side—never on yours. How could I ever have doubted this, remembering our youth together, and your self-denying, patient, trustful nature? I had believed the falsehoods that were invented of you. I had suspected and misjudged you. I had said and done most hard and cruel things. What wonder if I felt that you could never forgive me, and that you never *ought* to forgive me? But, Steve, when I saw you again, when I heard again the old, gentle, unsuspecting tones, I knew I could ask even that from you. We were lads together, Steve, and for the sake of that time, and the dear memory of the mother who loved us both so equally, you—will forgive me.”

There is a little silence, while father stands with both his hands in his brother's, gazing at him wonderingly—seeing his face, I think, only among the mists and memories of twenty years.

“Now, Steve, for this later fraud. My fortune was won when I first had my eyes clearly opened to Murray's motives and conduct, but I knew I could not enjoy it unless I came to England to share it with you, in the old home which years before I had bought back. But, as the old stories had been disproved only by my own heart, I made a plan—not in suspicion, Steve, only in a solitary man's longing to find you what I remembered you as a boy, and what I had lately loved to fancy you as a man, growing old like myself—to see the life you had led, and would lead, before knowing your brother had come home rich, and you need work no longer. You could never understand that cowardly longing, Steve, because it could only belong to a solitary man who had made himself no home-ties, and had been cruelly deceived by the only man he had ever taken to be his friend. So, this longing being so very strong upon me, I resolved to test you first. And I did, only to find my brother just what I could remember him—generous, self-denying, unsuspecting even in his poverty. Even your children, Steve,” he looks at me now, glad, I think, to turn his eyes for a moment from father's agitated face,—“have won my heart for their own sakes, by showing me what they too could be to a stranger who, without a shadow of a claim, threw himself upon their charity and compassion. The man

whose escape you planned so kindly, Jean, is as grateful to you as if he had really been in terror of the law. The poor young lodger who has lived on your charity from day to day, is as thankful as if he really had had nothing else to hope for. The solitary fellow who spent so many hours in a cold and lonely room feels your hospitality as gratefully as if he had no other home to go to. But let me explain the fraud. It is such a relief to speak without a lisp, and I am not afraid of your recognising your brother's voice now, Steve.

"As I had determined, if possible, to prove the falsehood of those lies under your own roof, you may imagine I was delighted to see that you had rooms to let. I made Jean promise to keep them for me on an uncertainty, and then I sent to tempt you—with three times the sum you had asked, with the certainty of letting the rooms for a permanency, and with an offer you could have closed with in that very hour. But you had promised, and the promise was sacredly kept. I came and stayed week after week, without paying—I, who had no claim upon you! Just because you thought I was poor and solitary, you gave me shelter and warmth and kindness—ay, and even food too, however little you might have among yourselves. Steve, never once, either from yourself or from your children, have I heard anything but what was generous and compassionate!

"Jean, I tempted you most of all, through that printed bill, offering you a sum which would have lifted all trouble from your young head, my child, and from your father's drooping one. My little girl, I must own that after that fraud—when I had purposely betrayed to you whom you were harbouring, and then had put into your very hand the offer of one hundred pounds—I did indeed fear. But what need had I to fear from those whose charity is that which thinketh no evil?"

"I saw the crisis coming for you, Steve, and I could even wait for that. Never could you guess how hard this was to do, while I lived among you all, unknown; taking of the little that you had, and myself making you poorer day by day. No, you could never understand anything of this. You could never know the misery it was to me to see you leaving home day after day—you, whose resting-time should have come, Steve—to seek work, for which the spirit was so willing, but the flesh so weak, and coming home each evening, jaded and disappointed, yet always trusting for the morrow, always patient over the wasted day. Still I held back, for I had others to test too. I saw your children here at home denying themselves, and working untiringly all day, that there might be no privation and no dulness when you came—working without even one murmuring or covetous word. And then, Steve, I saw the brave young fellow who loves your

daughter preparing day by day to leave her, and trying to bear this bravely too. And even he was never suspicious of me, though of all the household he was the only one I feared—he, with his straightforward, truthful gaze. It was he I was testing most, Jean; but—never mind that. He shall know how—presently. Then, Steve, you can never guess the pain it was to me to hear the complaints and reproaches of my sister—my sister as much as yours, though I never gave her a home, and the care you gave her—and to hear you so patient with her, all of you; so more than patient, making her always the first person in your house.

“Well, Steve, I waited for the crisis, as I said, and now it has come. The man your landlord sent is paid, and has left the house for good. Your other debts shall be all settled to-morrow, and we and—*our* children will go down to the old home to recruit. I have it ready, and there we will rest together, and the two lads who bear our names, Steve—for twenty years I had not felt such a throb of joy as when I heard you call your boy Dolf!—shall grow up there, and work out the old projects *we* made together so many years ago. And no stranger, please heaven, shall ever sow ill-will between *them*. They will have to go to school, I suppose, presently, but Lottie shall be taught at home. We cannot spare both our girls, for I have not lived in the same house with them for a month, Steve, without feeling what that old home will be with them about it.

“And, Jean, though Philip will want to take you away, dear, he will not want to take you far. I bought that Worcester appointment for him as soon as he told me of his disappointment. I paid the sum the advertiser required, and he put a man in temporarily for four weeks. It is ready for Philip, and he will be near us, Jean. And so, when he takes you, dear, he will not take you far, and we shall see you both constantly. How could we spare you otherwise?”

“Steve, look up, dear old fellow, and show me you are glad that there is such a life in store for us all; a life that can never again be darkened by debt, or cramped by poverty, or—saddened by disagreement. Steve, I am waiting for you to say you forgive me for this fraud.”

“It is like a dream, Dolf. I—I am afraid of waking.”

“Yet to me,” my uncle says, his gay tones almost as unsteady as father’s, “sleep seems ten thousand miles away, and—Ah!”

The surprised exclamation may well break off his speech, for there beside him stands Aunt Charlotte, in her dressing-gown, upright and angry.

“What are you doing here,” she asks, looking rigidly at my uncle. “Are you another man put into possession? Go away

for to-night. I have a valuable garnet-brooch, and I will give it you, if you will leave him in peace for to-night. He is not well, and he is very tired, and always good to others. The garnets cost a great deal of money once. Will you go? Why should his home be made so miserable to him to-day? Why should—Why—— Where have I—seen you—?”

“The fixed stern gaze upon his face has grown to one of troubled eagerness; her breath is coming in quick, short gasps.

“Charlotte, do you forget me? I never deserved to be remembered, I know, yet Steve knew me in a moment.”

She gives a cry which I know to be of joy, but then—poor Aunt Charlotte, she has borne so much to-day, and is but weak at best!—she would have fallen, I think, but that I catch her in my arms.

CHAPTER XIV.

“DOLF,”—Aunt Charlotte has awakened to consciousness, and looks up pitifully at my uncle, while father stands chafing her hands—“I have been very hard with Steve and his motherless children. And it's too late now.”

“Too late, my dear? No,” he answers, earnestly, “both you and I have time before us, please Heaven, to undo the wrong we have done.”

Lottie has come down now, and is in the wildest state of joy, kissing, first father, and then uncle Dolf, and then putting her radiant, laughing face close to mine, and making me burst into laughter too. Then Philip comes in, and uncle Dolf tells his own story to him; while Philip's joy seems to dazzle me, and makes me very shy and quiet, thinking for how long happiness has been a stranger to him, and yet how carefully he has hidden from me his heavy despondency. An hour ago he came into us disappointed and hopeless. And now!

“Shall I give you back your Liverpool ticket?” my uncle asks him, with a final grip of his hand, and a warm, amused look up into his face. “I have it here. I'm very glad not to be any longer in terror of meeting your frank, shrewd gaze. Jeanie, can you guess what I suffered on that Saturday afternoon at the museum, while I nipped and snapped, and tried to tempt you from your fealty to each other? What an impossible effort it was!”

“But how——”

“Oh, don't ask me any questions!” he pleads, though he looks delighted at our great amazement. “I have other lodgings, you know, Jeanie, and I went there—a hansom travels faster than

two young lovers walk—and changed my dress, and was in the museum before you; very tired of it too that day, I remember. And after you had left I had time to drive back and be at the spot where you met me—your solitary, shy young lodger. You thought me a sour book-worm that day, didn't you? Ah, well, you forgive the old man now. He has been a sneak for a long time, and only a Jesuit perhaps would tell him the end will justify the means. Jeanie, you have most to forgive, after your father."

"Oh, uncle," I cry, with both my hands in his, "what a happy night this is!"

"Jeanie," Philip whispers, coming up to bring me, as I kneel at the neglected fire, the bellows which he has fetched from the kitchen, "there lives no happier fellow in the world than I. At the very darkest moment the joy came. Oh, my love, what a lesson to me never utterly to despair! What happiness there is in your dear face to-night!"

"Philip, blow scientifically if you possibly can—and from the bottom—then there will be a glorious fire in five minutes' time."

I do not think men are, as a rule, very clever at blowing fires, but Philip does his best; and presently the waves of light glide up and down the walls, to the slow, regular music of his bellows; and, when the fire is what he modestly calls "perfection," he jumps up and helps Lottie and me to lay a sort of impromptu supper. Then he goes up with uncle Dolf to his old room, and comes down carrying unexpected relishes, which uncle Dolf has, it seems, prepared for to-night. Then I go up to fetch the little boys, who are still awake; and Philip follows to fetch me, as he says; and—ah, what can I say more of that happy night?

* * * * *

One moment more!

I listen to the dear, bright voices talking of that happy home which is to be father's, and one near it which is to be—mine. I see Aunt Charlotte's unusual smile, and that gladness of Lottie's which is so really childlike, yet so unfamiliar to her. I see the little boys laughing and clapping their hands, with eyes as wide and bright as if it were morning instead of night. I see uncle Dolf restless in his great delight, going with bright, loving words from one to another of us, but always returning to father's side. I see father—no, I never see him quite properly that night, because my eyes are so ridiculously dim; but I feel his gentle kisses when the night is over, and I hear him telling Philip—

No matter! Philip surely knows that *only* by my great love for him can I ever feel worthy to be his wife.

DOLF'S BIG BROTHER.



“ ‘So there the nice old lady sat,
With phials and boxes all in a row.’ ”

I quoted, laughingly.

“Phillis,” granny said, looking up from a letter she was reading, “don’t you want to hear how they are all at home?”

“At home! Why, I know how they all are at home, granny, because *this* is home. You don’t think I have thought of the vicarage at All Hallows on the Mere as home since my father married again.”

“Why will you resent that?” sighed granny, in her gentle way; as she had said a hundred times before, during those six years through which she had, for my dead mother’s sake, let her home be mine, and let me love her as if I belonged to her. “Your mother had spoiled him for living without a wife, Phillis, and I wish you to be fair to your stepmother. She never was strong, and your father is growing old; his living is a poor one, too, it only brings in two hundred pounds a-year; and, though your stepmother has four or five thousand pounds, she knows it was intended by her first husband for the purchase of a practice for his son—he is a doctor, you know—and she would not touch it, I am sure.”

“I have never seen him.” I answered, with intense dislike of the subject.

“You have not even seen your own little brother, Phillis, and it is of him I wish to speak to you, dear. This letter is from his mother, and she writes very sadly about Dolf. While I read her pretty, patient, little letter, Phillis, I made up my mind to have the child here for a time, if she will send him to me—to us. I am sure our air is fresher than theirs at All Hallows on the Mere, with the smoke of a hundred furnaces so near, and in any case change of air alone is often good, and change of scene and

nourishment. We can promise care, at any rate, so I shall write at once myself."

I broke off my sigh in time for granny not to hear it, because I knew it sounded heartless, Dolf being almost my own brother. But how very disturbing it would be, in our dear, little peaceful home, to have a fretful child who would make a perpetual call upon my time, and care, and patience. Too bad, I declared to myself, as I went back to watch old Peter sweep away the fallen leaves, for this was October, and every morning they lay in drifted heaps upon the garden grass and paths. I went a great deal further down the garden than I need, and then into the meadow beyond, because I knew they were gathering the damsons in Mr. Hamet's orchard, and I fancied Alfred might chance to be there at that very time overlooking the men. And there he was, and he came up to the fence the moment he saw me.

"What a lucky chance," he cried, while granny's one grazing cow, standing with me in the meadow, lifted her meek head to see whose voice disturbed her.

"I am overlooking Peter," I observed, with no air of having thought of Alfred's existence, and looking down the slope over Mr. Hamet's stubble land. "It is dreadful to see how the leaves fall in the night. The beech upon the lawn looks nearly bare this morning. Are you busy?" with a sudden recollection of his presence.

"Yes, unfortunately; but I hope to get off with my gun presently.

"You are not often busy," I suggested, absently watching a partridge rise from the stubble, its wings whirring through the crisp bright air.

"Far too often," laughed Alfred. He looked a very fine fellow, as he leaned upon the fence between us, and I think he knew it. He wore his shooting-dress that he might start as soon as his father released him, and he must have known how well it suited his tall, well-formed figure; and, when he pushed his straw hat back on his curly chestnut hair, he must have known what a comely ruddy face he left exposed to the caressing sunlight. "Far too often," he said. "If I had your leisure, P'hillis, wouldn't I enjoy myself!"

Then a sudden feeling of profound depression swept across me. My happy leisure was going to be stolen from me all through this month I loved so well. I should have a constant tie upon my time and thoughts. Perhaps no more strolling with Alfred over the red-brown leaves, talking nonsense; no more standing at his side, in silence, to watch the glory of these October sunsets. Ah me! and I had no right to will it otherwise. Alfred

had no claim upon me to be put beside my little brother's. He was only my friend ; only the son of our nearest neighbour.

"I shall have no more leisure, Alfred," I sighed, and then told him why, and all about my little brother, and my home—my other home; though not in many words, of course, because I knew he wanted to start with his gun.

"The baby must not take your time and thoughts from me, Phillis," he said, rather eagerly. "If his brother is a druggist—didn't you say a druggist?—why doesn't he take the ailing infant in charge, and cure him?"

"I wish he would," I said, laughing at his translation of my word doctor, "for I don't like little boys."

"Nor I," laughed Alfred. Then I sauntered on, looking for blackberries, while he went away, singing his little song, "Phillis is my only joy."

Three days afterwards (only three, so quickly had my step-mother fallen into granny's plans), I drove the little wicker pony-carriage to our roadside station to meet Dolf. Granny said she was not inclined for a drive that day, but I remember fancying it was only her whim that I alone should meet my little brother; perhaps that we two might make friends all the sooner. But on the way, while I stopped to make a dainty little buttonhole of tinted leaves, Alfred overtook me, and presently, finding we had loitered there together a good while, he drove me on as fast as little Mike could trot. The train had come in, though, and rolled out of sight, and on the platform stood the only passenger it had deposited—a small lank boy, with an old-fashioned air, and a very evidently home-made great-coat reaching half-way down his thin bare legs.

"Is it Dolf?" I asked, going forward to the lonely little fellow, and really smiling, though I was not glad to see him.

"I'm Dolf," he answered, looking solemnly up at me. "Are you Phis? And is this," he went on, looking soberly up at Alfred's length, when Mr. Hamet met us at the station door, "your big brother? I've got a big brother," continued the child, bringing out this fact as if it were of paramount importance to us all.

"I am very willing you shall keep him," Alfred said, while he made the child sit down opposite me. "Now, don't kick Miss Henderson."

"Then she isn't Phis?" regretfully. "Nor he isn't your big brother?" slowly and wonderingly, and for the first time moving his gaze to me.

"Don't ask questions," put in Alfred.

"Have you ever been to school, Dolf?" I inquired, thinking to lead the conversation safely, for I could not quite resolve to leave him out of it.

"No. Father teaches me, and mother plays with me. Shall you teach me?" gravely and joylessly looking up into Alfred's face, "and will This play with me?"

"I can tell you," replied Alfred, with a brusque laugh, "that Miss Henderson has something else to do than play with you."

"So has mother," remarked the child, as thoughtfully, in his simplicity, as if he had been grown up, and had a double motive in the words.

"You haven't answered for yourself, Alfred," I said, trying to laugh. "He wants to know if you are going to teach him."

Alfred's laugh had no effort in it; it was prompt and spontaneously disdainful.

"Not if he never learns a letter."

"I—I—I want my own big brother!"

It was such a pitiful, pleading cry, yet so suppressed, that I felt my own eyes filling.

"You will be home soon," I said, looking away over the fields, not to see the struggle to keep back the tears. I never thought of kissing the tremulous lips, or taking the sad little head within my arms. Oh, never!

When we reached Inglewood, granny was taking her afternoon nap, so I led Dorf to his room. He did not speak to me on the way, though, after shaking hands with Alfred, I had taken his hand in mine; nor did he speak when he stood in the little room, gazing in an awe-stricken sort of way at an old engraving of the deluge, which hung opposite his bed. I unpacked his bag for him, and brushed his hair when he had washed his face and hands, then I told him he could run downstairs and I would follow him in a few minutes. But, before I reached his door on my way down, I heard a sound of suppressed and passionate sobbing, and I hastened in, opening the door softly and closing it behind me that granny might not hear the melancholy sound—as the child had not meant she should hear, for his face was buried in the bedclothes, as if he would smother the sobs he could not check.

"What is it, Dolf?" I whispered, and I could not help just kneeling down beside him when I asked it. "What is it, dear?"

"Oh, Larry, Larry!" he sobbed. "Oh, my own big brother!"

It was rather a comfort to me, I remember, that he was not crying for his father or mother, only for a brother. *His* place surely we could soon fill.

"Come," I said, consolingly, and sure of the efficacy of my remedy. "Come to tea; there is beautiful jam, Dolf."

"No, thank you," said the lad, quite politely, while he looked faint enough to need two teas. "I don't want tea, thank you, I couldn't eat it; I want—oh, when will Larry come?"

And indeed it was no use. I could not get him down to tea, nor would he touch what granny sent up; but while he knelt on the low window seat, looking far away (with eyes that ought to have been closed in sleep), an idea struck me, and I led him to talk of his brother.

"Larry is the name of your big brother, is it, Dolf?" I asked, sitting down beside him.

"Yes," with a gulp.

"Tell me about him. Is he very big?"

"Oh, yes! When will he come?"

My plan seemed scarcely to have answered, but I persisted in making him talk of this brother of his until his eyes grew bright with the subject; and presently he fought with his weariness and loneliness no longer, and lay down in bed. But I never thought that he might perhaps have fallen asleep more easily in my arms.

"He will be all right in the morning," I said, confidentially, to granny; but in the morning the child looked anything but all right when I went into his room.

"Come, Dolf," I said, pretending not to notice how pale and inert he looked, standing buttoning his little tunic, with his back turned to the old engraving. "You want your breakfast, I know, and, after you have eaten an egg, I'll show you the hen that laid it."

He did not brighten even at this alluring prospect, though he thanked me, and after breakfast I took him to see the poultry. I fancied he was enjoying himself, but I was too pre-occupied perhaps to notice, for afterwards granny asked me why I had kept him out to grow so pinched and cold. As if I could dream of anyone growing pinched and cold in that bright, clear October air!

So the whole week went by. The child was gentle, and patient, and obedient, but in a most persistently aggravating way he would explain the weight upon him as "wanting Larry," and day by day the weight seemed to press more heavily upon the sickly little frame and restless, lonely spirit. I could see that Alfred Hamet's first indifference to my little brother had become dislike now.

"Go away," he would sometimes say, almost roughly, when he met the child with me. "You seem to think Phillis belongs to you."

"No, I don't," the child made answer once, with a flash of unwonted spirit of which I was glad, though indeed I thought it rather absurd in such a puny person.

"Then go away. You have had her all day, and I want her now."

"I daresay I looked glad, for I *was* glad that Alfred wanted me, but I do not know why that should have made the boy glance in such a scared manner from Alfred to me, and then back to Alfred.

"Go," Mr. Hamet repeated, seeing nothing of how Dolf was trying to keep back the tears. "I say you cannot have Phillis any more.

"I don't want her," the child cried, his passion bursting all restraint now, "I don't want her, nor you. I want Larry. Oh!"—with a shriek he fled from us to the house—"Larry, come!"

When we went in afterwards, granny was sitting beside Dolf's bed, her face rather stern for her (dear old granny!) as she looked down upon the child.

"I cannot stand this, Phillis," she said, her own dear eyes a little dim. "I have decided to ask the big brother, for whom he is always whining, to come here; I have, indeed, Phillis" (as if I had dissented, or she expected me to dissent), "for I am afraid of the child falling ill. I shall ask Lawrence Byrne to come, not as a doctor, but as his brother. I have quite decided."

I always knew by granny's face when she had quite decided anything, and so, of course, I had no word to say. But when I went to dismiss Alfred (telling him granny was not coming down again that evening) I told him of her decision, and how sorry I was.

In the afternoon of the next day but one, granny woke rather uneasily from her forty winks. Dolf was lying on the rug, with a picture-book; a limp and quiet little figure, with that subdued, feverish restlessness which made me watch him a good deal, even against my will, and made granny really anxious.

"I forgot that Mr. Byrne may be coming, as he did not write. I ought to prepare the child."

"No need. He never thinks of anyone else, granny," I said, my heart sinking as I pictured this new innovation into the home that used to be so snug.

"Can't you rouse him a little, Phillis? Tempt him into the garden, even only to the hall door, for a breath of the outer air. Try, dear."

"I had need to try, the child ~~was~~ so disinclined to stir, but he came at last, when I had taken his hand and promised him a story. I sat down upon the doorstep, looking along the shady little lawn, and Dolf stood beside me, waiting listlessly for the

promised tale. It was about a little boy who was drowned, for I cannot remember any other style of narrative I was ever equal to, or any sparkle I ever put even upon that gloomy romance. I had reached what ought to have been an appalling moment, when the typical youth drifts off in somebody else's boat, while he ought to be writing his copy at school, when suddenly Dolf lifted his head, hearing the click of the garden gate. I knew then that his polite attention to my recital must have been a little forced, and I naturally resented this; but I also knew instinctively who was opening the gate, and so (instinctively too, I think) I put my arm around the child. I must have done it in alarm, when I saw his eyes dilate, and such a feverish flush burn in his face (the face that changed so utterly in that one instant), but I fancied it was in tenderness. He put it aside, and darted from me, down the lawn; flying over the grass and flower-beds, never heeding what was on his way, only rushing direct to some one who was coming in; meeting him with such a cry of joy as I had never won in all my life, and never could, from any heart. I turned away and went through the house, and on through the kitchen garden and the meadow, restless and discontented.

Tea was ready when I returned, and there, at the door, looking out for me, just as if he cared whether I came or not, was Dolf—but quite a new Dolf. A bright, contented, wide awake little fellow, perched on the shoulder of his big brother—what am I saying? *Big brother!* Why, Dolf's brother was one of the shortest gentlemen I had ever seen, and *unbig* in every way. He had quite a thin and narrow figure, as well as a short one, and oh! I did so dislike little men. He was pale, too, with hair just the colour of straw, and oh! I did so dislike fair men.

Of course I tried to say a few civil things while we stood there in the hall, but it was very hard, because the consciousness was so strong and painful that this man's mother had arrogated *my* mother's place, and that he had let her do it; encouraged her, of course, that he himself might win his way unhampered, and keep his own fortune. Mr. Byrne did not seem to notice how difficult it was for me to be as courteous as I felt granny would require me to be in her own house, and and this aggravated me more. He took my observations in as easy a manner as if he fancied he had, with his mother's marriage, arrogated the position of my own brother.

I went in with them and made the tea, but returned into the hall, that Dolf's brother might give granny a little of his superfluous discourse; and just then Alfred Hamet came in.

I turned gladly to greet him, so relieved to meet his calm dark eyes, after those searching grey ones; so glad that he was big, and tall, and manly.

"Oh! Alfred," I said, in a whisper, laughing while he held my hand—he always held it rather a long time—"the big brother has come, and he is small and altogether mean."

I watched granny introduce Alfred to Dorf's brother, and I could not help that proud, pleased little feeling in my heart to see the difference between them, but I was not glad that Alfred should smile when he noted it; at any rate, that he should let this smile be visible; because of course it was not quite polite.

Dorf's tea was over (it had been the mockery of a meal, for the child was far too much excited and too feverish to eat), and he was sitting very upright, listening—as if, poor little fellow! that satisfied his hunger best—to every word his brother spoke, when suddenly, and without any warning (unless the motion of the little restless hands, and that burning flush in the thin cheeks, had prepared one who loved him), Dolf's head fell sideways on his brother's shoulder, and we saw that the lad's happy surprise had culminated in unconsciousness.

So quietly, and as if he were used to it, that it was far more like a woman than a man (though I knew no woman who would have done it so), Lawrence took the child tenderly in his arms, and rose, with an apology to granny.

"Go, Phillis," granny said to me, in her gentle troubled way; and so I followed presently, but not too willingly, for Dolf's brother had not even suggested any possible help or comfort I could be.

"No, thank you," this doctor said, in his quiet, easy way, when I stood at the door to ask if I could be of any use. "What use could you be?" he asked, with a backward glance at the little bed, and in evident haste for me to go.

I took his question literally, and went downstairs again, telling Alfred and granny that it was only a childish faint. But afterwards there dawned within me the consciousness—no, I mean the consciousness strengthened into knowledge—of what his quiet ironical question meant; and I knew I might have been of use at my little brother's side, even though he had a doctor with him whom I could not bear.

I told Alfred quietly that I would not ask him to stay; then, seeing granny comfortable, I went up again and tapped nervously—I who had never been nervous all my life!—on Dolf's door.

"Come in," said a voice, whose quietness relieved me wonderfully. The fire had been lighted, and Lawrence sat before it with Dolf on his knee, and the child was laughing, while on the hob

of the little, old-fashioned grate, a copper kettle sang cheerily. Then something struck me as missing in the room, and I looked round to discover it. Was it that there was no sign of the medicine-bottles that had collected under our rule round the ailing lad, only toys about the room? No, scarcely that alone. Stay, the great print of the Deluge was missing. I understood now, and recalled, with a qualm of self-reproach, how often I had seen the wide, sad eyes of the child fixed, in awe and even terror, upon the ghastly print. Why had I never thought of this bright, pleasant change in the little room?

"Is he better?" I asked, coming up to the fire, after begging Lawrence to sit again. But a glance told me that this subject was not to be discussed; a bright, pleasant glance, while Dolf's big brother just easily began to talk, as if no one in the house were, or ever had been, ill.

"I am so fond of hearing a kettle simmer," he said. "Do you remember that Halevy always put a kettle on his study fire when inspiration failed him?"

"Larry was telling me a story, Phis," put in Dolf, wistfully.

"May I stay?" I asked, in a most unpremeditated manner, simply for the enjoyment of listening: not with the selfish motive which came later to pick up the style Dolf liked.

"We had nearly finished," Lawrence said, and all this while I could see—even I—that he held the child with strength and comfort in his touch. So he finished the story, and I listened with alarm, for there was no moral in it, none. It had evidently been a fiction of the most bewildering and sensational type, where animals discoursed freely, and did wonderful things, scarcely ever for any motive higher than to bring laughter. And this was the doctor!

Dolf could not leave his room for many days, but we were not afraid, though anxious, because Lawrence took the case so entirely and willingly into his own skilled and tender hands, bearing the responsibility and anxiety with such quietness that, as granny sometimes said (and, of course, I could not contradict her), he never let us feel the usual discomforts of an invalid in the house.

Of course, I knew that Dolf still took medicine sometimes, but there never was a sign of it to remind or depress the child, and the few toys he possessed were made so much of, purporting to hold such wonderful histories and legends, and to be capable of such feeling and power, that no wonder the dreamy little lad loved them, and could be at any time happy with them when it was advisable for him to be left alone. Perhaps I did marvel a little now and then why I had never thought of these things, but I went just on my own way, seeing always as little as I need of Dolf's big brother. and aware how little he sought me, or seemed

cognisant of my presence. Resenting this, as well as other things, I betrayed my resentment, and with it probably a little of my most natural dislike to this interloper into granny's house and esteem—just as his mother had been an interloper into my father's home and heart.

In a week, Dolf was among us again, as—I was going to say as usual, but he was not at all as he had been before his brother came. He never looked inert and listless now; his eyes were not always now longing for some one who never came; his feet were not always tired; his words were not always wistful questionings.

"They are both your step-brothers. It is nonsense to suppose the druggist is anything else; but step-brothers have not such a claim upon you as men who want you to love them in another way, Philis, and so I will not have you giving me any less time than you used."

"I don't," I said. This kind of speech from Alfred had always given me a thrill of pleasure, and would have done so now, only that just at that moment we came in sight of granny's gate, and of two figures (though they looked like one) coming towards it from the opposite direction. Dolf was hanging limply on his brother's back, fast asleep, and Lawrence was holding him by the arms, whilst a long spray of ivy the child held hung round Lawrence like a huge necklet; and his coat was off, and put over Dolf. Of course they did look funny, and I should not have been at all surprised if Alfred had laughed.

We came up to the gate a minute before them, and Alfred opened it for me, and then held it open, with a supercilious look upon his face, which gave me a frightened feeling that I never knew before. But when Lawrence came up, and passed through the gate, turning to thank us, Alfred burst into an apparently uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"Tired of play, you children?" he asked with an insolence which made me turn away, even from him. "The boy's legs nearly touch the ground," he went on, pointing to Dolf's lank limbs hanging so weakly, "he will need a bigger brother very soon."

Not a word in answer, though Mr. Byrne's face was very white, and, when he walked on with the sleeping child, I was conscious of a slight disappointment in him, as well as a little anger against Alfred.

"All druggists are cads," he observed, to me, "and all cads are cowards. Who could help laughing, Phillis? Why, even you could not."

I had not had time to argue this, while we walked towards the house—for granny had invited Alfred for this evening, it being

Lawrence Byrne's last day with us, and dear old granny wishing the young men to be friends—when Lawrence came from it again, in his coat now, and looking just as usual, not even white and stern as before.

"I did not wish the child awakened," he said, addressing Alfred in his usual quiet tones, "but I have come back now to hear you apologise, or to show you what I think of you."

"Do you overlook," questioned Alfred, lifting his broad shoulders lazily, but with a polite glance at me, "the presence of a lady?"

"Your insult was offered to me in the presence of a lady," Lawrence said, but he never glanced towards me, "and the apology must be."

"In—deed?" interrogated Alfred, with a short, slow laugh that was new to me.

"If not," continued Lawrence, with the utmost composure, "choose your own spot, and don't be a coward."

I looked with terror up into Alfred's face, but there was no wrath upon it, only that new supercilious expression on his lips, and that throwing back of his head to make it more obvious how unmistakeably he had to look *down* upon his interrogator.

"A spot?" he repeated, in a pondering questioning way, just as if guessing a riddle. "A—spot?"

"You understand," put in Lawrence, briefly. "If you prefer it, I will accept an apology offered in the presence of Miss Henderson. If not, don't waste time."

"Oh! come, this is growing too absurd," cried Alfred, making us understand that the mention of my name was an impertinence he could not brook. "I will not be bullied. Go away, Phillis, while we settle this."

I had not awaited his permission, no, indeed. I had waited in the weak, senseless hope of my presence keeping back angry words. Yet I hastened in now, less from Alfred's curtly expressed wish, than from a totally different expression of it in Lawrence's eyes.

"Nonsense," I said to myself afterwards, as I sat on the floor by the sofa where Dolf lay sleeping, "who ever saw any expression worth mentioning in those light grey eyes?"

At first I fancied that I was very much afraid, as I sat with my head in my hands staring fixedly into the fire, but presently common sense came to my rescue. The young squire-farmer, tall and strong and manly, would never fight with a small, weak, townbred man like Lawrence Byrne; a man whose brain and fingers were his fortune, and whose muscles (ten to one) had never yet been tried. No, Alfred was a gentleman, and would never take such mean advantage of a brother's excusable resentment, and a man's excusable defence of his questionable dignity.

I do not know how long it was before anybody entered the room, but granny's housemaid was the first, when she came to fetch Dolf to prepare him for tea.

"I am a little late, Miss Phillis," the maid said, "but Mr. Hamet kept me to brush him. He was all dust from the back of his head to his heels. Miss Phillis, I can't think how he could have tumbled down so flat."

What a pity Alfred had let himself fall! I dared not ask where Mr. Byrne was. He must be, in any case, twice as much injured, and twice as dusty, as Alfred could be. But I myself saw Lawrence come in, as I went to fetch granny from her room, and most certainly he had not been down in the dust. He came into the hall, whistling softly, and never gave a glance for the clothes-brush.

"Did you hurt—each other?" I inquired, trying not to seem as if I cared in the slightest whether they had or not.

"We tried," he said, and I could see he wanted to smile. "I daresay we both remembered that one of the ethics of Christianity—according to the great Jesuit Father—is that it is allowable to kill another if there be no other means of saving one's honour and good renown."

Of course, I took no notice of that heartless remark, as I went gravely on; but I remember having a doubt in my mind whether Alfred would be conversant with such very questionable morality. The two young men were together when granny and I went to tea, and I talked a great deal to Alfred, just to show him I could not endure arrogant and combative little men. Somehow I knew quite well that his motive for coming in after his—accident, was to prevent our having any discussion about this afternoon's work, but I would not let myself remember that, because he was so very attentive to me.

"Alfred," said granny—her gentle eyes had followed him this evening quite unusually—"have you rheumatism in your shoulder? You seem to be suffering from a pain or stiffness there?"

"Only your fancy, Mrs. Lloyd," Alfred said, but his face had clouded, and I knew it would have been a relief to him to answer crossly.

Then he sauntered over to the piano without me, and played for himself the accompaniment to "Phillis is my only joy." I was annoyed; I could not help it; yet what pleasure the song had given me many a time, sung in his bold, significant way.

"I should think," observed granny, "that Phillis is getting a little tired of that ballad, Alfred."

"And you don't like it, I daresay," remarked Alfred, standing tall upon the rug, and smiling the question down upon Lawrence.

"Yes, I do," was the tranquil reply, "as a ballad. But any man would be in a poor case who had only one joy, and that—Phillis."

"I felt very angry; I believe all the more so because the remark did not sound personal at all as he put it; but I went on with my work quietly, making up my mind that Alfred should never sing that song again to me. Presently Mr. Byrne asked me to play. I just negligently shook my head and bent it again to my knitting, and soon afterwards Alfred went away and I took granny to her room.

"Phillis, Dolf's brother leaves in the morning before we shall see him. He wants to save little Dolf the parting. He has left with me a letter and a book for the child, thinking the good-bye would be hard upon him."

"Yes," I said, and there were stupid tears in my eyes—of sympathy for little Dolf.

Of course I went to bid him good-bye, wishing all the way that I had not let Alfred speak to me to-day, as he had done, of Dolf's big brother; and wishing that, as I was, so to speak, in my own house here at granny's, I had behaved differently this evening to her guest—my own guest, as it were. Mr. Byrne was reading in the sitting-room when I went back, and he did not look surprised to see me; I do not know why he *should*, only I remember often *trying* to make him look surprised to see me. He rose and bade me good-bye, in the most common-place manner, and I went away in suppressed anger with myself for feeling heavy-hearted, when this was the last night I should have to undergo the enforced society of this interloper.

Next day I told granny many times that I was glad to have her all to myself again; and I stayed with her even though she would talk of my stepmother's son; and even when she declared she should keep Dolf till Christmas-time. He was with me, too, all through that day, poor little fellow, in the loneliness he tried so hard to hide. And, though Alfred was sitting with us when Dolf's bedtime came, I went upstairs with the child, and waited with him. A few evenings before, when I had passed his room door, I had heard his brother softly whistling "Clear and cool," and as I knew the song, I sang it voluntarily to Dolf now. I think it must have been the little fellow's rapt attention that made me suddenly break down, and humiliated me in my little brother's eyes.

"Phis," he said, with a bright little air of knowing exactly how to cheer me, "look!"

He had brought, from a corner of his little box, a faded daguerreotype of his brother, and having put it first gently to his own face, lifted it now to mine. How could I refuse what he so evi-

dently wished? I touched the glass with my lips, and then, with a little, gentle, patient sigh, the child laid the picture under his pillow. I remembered it was there as I bent over him with my good-night kiss; I remembered how Lawrence loved him, and was good to him, so I folded him in my arms and kissed him as never in my life had I kissed anyone before. As I went downstairs, not very swiftly, perhaps, for I felt sure Alfred would wait, and—I fancy I was thinking of something else; I became aware that Alfred was waiting for me at the foot of the staircase.

"My patience is not unlimited, Phillis," he said, in a tone corroborative of his words. "Are you beginning to let that baby keep you from me? I certainly thought we should make up for lost time when we had got rid of the druggist."

"How dare you sneer?" I cried, and for a moment my eyes felt as if they were on fire. "He is granny's friend, and this is granny's house. How dare you speak as you do here?"

He walked out of the house at once, offended, as I could see, and by that time I was very sorry for my petulance. Alfred had done nothing really to vex me, for he had only said what I had often let him say before. I sat down by the sitting-room fire alone, after granny was gone to bed, and tried to be very sorry for letting my temper get the better of me. Alfred had done no harm—I said it again and again. He might in fun call any doctor a druggist, and what was this particular doctor that I should care what Alfred called him? Had I not all my life had an abhorrence of little men, and especially of fair little men, and more especially of fair little men who could not sing? Oh, yes! Alfred might say just what he chose.

Yet that night I sat up in bed actually smiling as I pictured what Alfred's appearance must have been the day before, "all dust from the back of his head to his heels," and one shoulder so palpably stiff. Yet he was my friend. But then, does not Rochefoucauld, who certainly was shrewd enough to understand all about that sort of thing, say there always is something in the misfortunes of our friends which is not displeasing to us?

When Christmas drew near, and it was time to arrange a day for Dolf's return home, granny gently put before me a proposition which had evidently long been forming itself in her mind. She had offered a home at Inglewood to a niece of hers, who had lately lost her husband, and so she could spare me for a time, she said, if I would like to take Dolf home and spend Christmas with my father—even granny, tenderly as she put the whole plan before me, had corrected herself as she was going to say with my parents. I know now how carefully she expressed her wish as only a suggestion, so that, if I obeyed her, it might seem as

if it were my own wish only ; but when I (with but poor grace, I fear) decided to go, she spoke quite differently.

"You have done wisely and well, my dear," she said, and I never saw her so kind and loving as she was then. "Your father is growing an old man ; he was middle-aged when you were born, you know, and he has much to do in that poor parish of his. Then I fear his wife is less able for exertion and responsibility than you think, and, though she would never ask you to return, thinking you are better off, as we call it, with me, still I can imagine how glad she may be to have your help and company. And now that Dolf and you are friends, and he wants so much care, you will not, I am sure, wish to resign it to one who has so much to do besides. When you love me best," she said, "you please me most, my pet, and it will please me most for you to be where your duties are."

And that was why I went home with Dolf to spend Christmas in the little vicarage of All Hallows on the Mere, or, as granny would have wished me to say, to my own home. How vividly sometimes even now that winter journey comes back to me ! We had to go into another train at Birmingham, and here, quite unexpectedly, Lawrence Byrne joined us, to Dolf's intense delight, but to my regret. He had come down from London to spend Christmas with his mother. I remember how I sat looking out upon the lurid fires that burned so fiercely against the pale, soft sunset sky, and upon their angry reflection in the dark water now and then ; and I remember changing seats with Dolf to see how purely and calmly the moon rode above the towering chimneys, and brightened the white smoke that tried to reach it. But I do not remember that ever once I volunteered to talk with Dolf's big brother.

Granny had been right. I found my father looking quite an old man, and his wife, pale, and thin, and ageing too ; yet never once did I hear a word of complaint from her, nor ever once did she say she was wearied by the ceaseless round of duties which day by day she met so willingly. Never after our meeting did it again occur to me to call her an interloper into my mother's place, but I was not allowed to see what tasks really devolved upon her, either in her home or in the parish, until Lawrence left her again ; for somehow he seemed to take so many on himself, in such a natural and willing and easy manner, that no wonder I never knew what she had to do while he was there to do it.

No one knows how much I dreaded that Christmas Day, yet, looking back upon it now, I know it was one of the few days in my life which it is good for me to remember.

Of the days that followed it I quite lost count until, when the week was gone, Dolf's big brother walked quietly into the room

where I sat alone darning Dolf's stockings; and, standing opposite me on the hearthrug, leaning against the narrow chimney-piece, to the great danger of a Wedgwood vase I had brought father for a Christmas-box, he told me—oh, me! that I could have been prepared for this—that his holidays were over, and that he loved me.

I do not know why I felt so stupefied as I listened, darning away all the time (I had every stitch to cut out afterwards, but no one knew that), but when he had quite finished I—laughed. He was looking at me very intently, and I saw a new look come into his face when he heard my laugh, a look that made my heart stop beating suddenly, just as if I had seen him fall.

"Speak to me," he said, almost sternly. "There is but one way to interpret your laughter; but let me be quite sure."

"What has there ever been between you and me," I asked, dropping my work, and trying to imagine what Alfred would have said to me if this had been he; "except just simply tolerance? It was quite natural." My words sounded to me a little hurried, but I know they were distinct and unmistakable. "Though I had not seen you, I nursed a prejudice against you for six years. Perhaps I am ashamed of that, but, when I overcome it, it will be because I have grown to like you as Dolf's brother, and begun to look upon you as my own brother too."

"You mean," he questioned, and, while his voice was very heavy, his words were as distinctly uttered as my own, "that only as a sister could you ever care for me?"

"Only," I answered (I knew he was thinking of Alfred, but so of course was I), "as a sister."

I do not think he said anything more, and by night I was quite sure he had reconciled himself comfortably to my decision: but I was quite sure, too, that something in his face had prevented my enjoying myself at all.

"Good-bye," he said to me next afternoon. He had spent all the morning alone with his mother, to my surprise, and now Dolf and I walked with him to the village station, and he had sent Dolf down the platform in important guardianship of his bag. "I am very glad you are so kindly staying on with my mother, Phillis. I leave here much more happily knowing she has your help and companionship. And you will lighten the duties too for father."

Never through the week had his utterance of that word pierced me with shame as at this moment, for I had never called his mother mine.

"Surely," I said, in angry impulse, "you cannot care for us. You must hate us."

"Hate you?" he echoed, with a ring of passion in his voice. "I would to Heaven—"

"You have cause to, any way," I said, heavily, in his abrupt pause.

But he answered now with perfect coolness,

"Perhaps. But hatred may be more easy where there is no cause—as in yours for me."

"Do you know," I said—oh, so wilfully misunderstanding him!—"I have nearly left off disliking you. I should propose your calling me your sister, only no man ever likes his poor relations."

"Poor, are you? I am well off myself," he said, rather to my surprise, with his eyes fixed absently upon little Dolf at the end of the platform. "Phillis, how well Goldsmith hit upon a definition of love, 'The modern fair one's jest.'"

"You will soon forget," I began, feebly; hoping the engine that I saw was bringing only coal-trucks.

"Oh, yes, he said, in quick, stern tones.

"Well, I know that there are thousands as pretty, and hundred as pleasant;

Girls by the dozen as good.'

Yes, man's love is a jest, as well as woman's. Good-bye. Come, Dolf, you have been a man long enough, now be a baby again, and give Larry a kiss. Aren't you glad I am not taking This?"

"Did you want to, Larry?" whispered the child, trying to gulp back his tears.

"Yes, but she will never go away with me, Dolf. Don't be afraid, dear."

"I would go," said Dolf, laying his little wet cheek against his brother's; and I turned away, feeling almost as much of a baby as he was.

Day after day, week after week, I postponed my return to Inglewood. I never even alluded to it in my father's presence, no, nor even in Dolf's, or mother's—I had brought myself to call her mother now, remembering how Lawrence had always addressed my father. Indeed least of all could I think of it when with her, for even my heedless and inexperienced eyes could see how she was fading; meeting each day's duties as they came, with a smiling, patient wonder *why* she was so often tired. Gradually, as I fitted myself for them, I took all possible tasks upon myself, but this was slow work to me in my ignorance, and there were so many, too, that only she could perform. I saw how my father leaned and depended upon her, and how brightly ready

she always was with help or sympathy for him, never seeming weary; and my heart bled for my old and long injustice. I kept Dolf with me all I could, that she might have more rest, but the child's love for his mother was too great for him to be always content with me, so I grew to be with them constantly, on the chance of relieving or cheering her. And thus it happened that I constantly heard Larry's name, for, even while I helped my father in the parish, I heard of him. Ah, how very, very patiently I used to sit at the cottage fires, on the chance of hearing those tales the poor could tell me of Mr. Byrne's care of them, always so prompt and quiet and unobtrusive, just as if he were scarcely aware himself of what he did. Often have I walked home through the village in the darkness, after talking of him, with a lump in my throat that literally pained me. One day as I walked slowly from a cottage on the Mere, with my thoughts full of him, I suddenly recalled how long it had been since mother had read me anything from his letters; indeed since she seemed to have heard from him at all, or had voluntarily talked to me of him. As I passed the church, father came from the vestry, and I waited for him; then, as we walked homewards in the darkness and quietness, I spoke to him of what was filling my thoughts.

"It is a long time since Lawrence came to see his mother at Christmas. Has he very hard to work, father?"

"Very hard to work, dear, I think."

"Too busy even to write?" I asked, a little surprised at something in father's tone. "I have fancied mother looks in vain for letters, and it is so unlike Lawrence to be heedless of any—of her."

"Unlike him, indeed! Then she has not told you that Larry has left England."

"Left England?" I echoed the words feebly, but I remember how different the darkness of the village felt to me after that.

"I will tell you how it was," father said, in his simple, straightforward way, "for I can understand Larry's mother would not speak of it. On the day he left here, he had a long interview with his mother, and you may guess its purport when, during it, she made her will, and left all that she had—all that was lawfully Lawrence's—to Dolf."

"The child is delicate," Lawrence said, "and will never be able to cope with the world, while I am strong and healthy, with a profession at my fingers' ends, a profession I would rather make, than buy, my way in. Nothing will give me ease about the future until you have secured the welfare of your youngest and delicate son—for we are equally your sons." So he has put it in that quiet, unanswerable way he has."

"But it was *his* father who left the money—not Dolf's."

"Not Dolf's," my father repeated, pausing at our own gate, "and, if I had been present, this generous act should never have been done. But they did not let me know till afterwards, when all argument was unavailing, and my wife's will was with her lawyer in London. I still hope," my father added, brokenly, "to persuade her to recall that will, and let the care of Dolf's future rest, as it ought, on Dolf's father and himself, and Lawrence go back to his own plans—his father's plans for him long ago. But when I say this to his mother, her answer always is, 'Larry knew best.'"

"Now," father added, just as if he guessed what I longed to ask, and could not, "Lawrence is surgeon on board the *Matchless*, and you know the fleet has just been sent to the West Coast of Africa. No wonder the mother is anxious, P'hillis."

"And only the mother had any right to be anxious! Only the mother! I let father go into the house alone, and I stood there in the darkness a long time. These were the interlopers into my father's home and heart—my father's small, poor home, and faint, dependent heart! These two!

No wonder my thoughts grew unbearable to me in the solitude and silence, being so heavy with remorse and shame. I would go and tell mother of my injustice, of all the years through which I had dared to judge, and had judged so meanly. I would confess all, and, if she *could* forgive me, that would bring me just a little nearer to them.

I thought she might be resting on the couch in father's study, so I went in softly.

Resting? Ah! yes, with little Dolf upon the floor beside her, holding her hand, and watching her in the firelight; and father sitting apart at the window, very still, for fear of awakening her. But the awaking was not one to fear, for a Father's loving hand had led her through the shadowy valley without pain, and from that peaceful sleep her eyes had opened to His glory.

I cannot even now bear my memory to rest upon the melancholy days that followed my mother's death. They passed, as will the darkest and the dreariest, and in my feeble way I did what I could to take her place. My father was so heartbroken, so bowed and spiritless, that he even leaned and depended now on me. He fretted, perhaps, a little less, as the weeks went by, and spent a little less time alone in his study in those long, deep fits of depression, but still I knew he would miss her all his life, and that I could never prevent it. We were a grave and sad little family, in spite of the ceaseless efforts which I made; and the one thing that would have brightened us never came. Two letters arrived from Lawrence to his mother after she was dead. Father

read them, at broken intervals, and told us of them, but I never, never could have read one line of them! Once father heard after that, and in each there was a little letter enclosed for Dolf. I have all those now. I bought them from the child with tears and kisses, for the bright, brave words that taught the boy good thoughts, yet never seemed to teach.

So life went on, and I ought to have been content, knowing I was useful now, and that those who were nearest to me loved me well, and could not spare me; but—is there this craving in all women's hearts for something in their lives that is even more than that? Granny had her widowed niece with her, and was glad for me to be at home. In her dear little frequent letters she told me so most lovingly, although she said she missed me much, and always should. Only one thing more happened in those sad months that followed mother's death. Alfred Hamet wrote to and asked me to be his wife; asked it so confidently (yet so pleasantly) that when I thanked him, and declined, he must have been very much surprised, for he came at once to All Hallows on the Mere, and would not seem as if he understood. But I understood. Oh, well, I understood that this was now impossible. But I was far more grateful to Alfred for the compliment he paid me, and far more gentle and more womanly in my answer to him, than I had been once before; so long ago it seemed, so very long ago!

So the weeks passed, until one day their blank monotony was broken by Dolf's muttering question,

"Phis, when will Christmas come?"

Then I remembered how near it was, and that I must prepare for it through all my father's poor and scattered parish. I was very glad to have this to do, very glad to be too busy to let my thoughts linger on the last Christmas time, or reach to the many lonely ones that were to come; and it did not need over much money to add a little to everyone's pleasure. Christmas Eve dawned such a fair, bright, sunny day, that something wonderfully like happiness was in my heart when Dolf and I stood out in the white garden, Dolf feeding the robins, and I waiting with a new comforter for the old letter-carrier when he should come. After I had wrapped him in it, folding it carefully over his chest, I glanced at the letters he had left.

There was not the one I always looked for, but one of father's letters was from Africa, in a strange handwriting, and my heart beat terribly when father came up to me just then and took it.

"That," he said, putting it back into my hand, "is from an old friend of mine, a merchant in Africa. I wrote to tell him the *Matchless* might lie at anchor in his port, and, if so, I hoped he would make Larry's acquaintance; so he is sure to have sent me

word of Larry. But his writing is so cramped, that you will spare my eyes, dear, if you look the letter through and then tell me of it.'

This was going to be a very busy day, of course, but I *must* see what this letter said of Lawrence, as soon as I could get away to read it. I had just time to look at the opening, and see that it was a cheerful account of this friend of father's having dined on board the *Matchless*, and spent a few hours very pleasantly with Lawrence; when I was hurried to the kitchen to give out the puddings and mince pies for the cottagers. Then the school children came for their little gifts; then father's Christmas letters had to be written; then Dolf's little letter to granny to be over-looked; then the old man came to dinner, and there was to be tea and supper arranged for the old women, and I was detained again and again. So the first leisure half-hour I could win was when, late in the afternoon, father went away to read over his Christmas sermon, and Dolf, utterly wearied by running about with me all day, had fallen asleep against my shoulder. I took out the African letter, and read it through—steadily through. Then I rose and put Dolf on the sofa, and went away to my own room.

Outside the stars were shining down upon the white, white snow. If they had not been, I think those minutes while I knelt there, looking out—and could not pray and could not cry—would have made me far more hard and selfish than I was before, for life was so long not to hold no single pleasure! But the stars shone, and the dear God who made them did not quite forget me.

I have that letter still, so worn where it is folded, that the thin paper falls in pieces if I open it, but I keep it even now, though I cannot read it for my tears. I know all it said. After telling of those hours he spent on board, my father's friend went on to say that Lawrence had not seemed well as the evening wore on, but though he had felt anxious, fearing the yellow fever, whose symptoms he fancied he detected, Lawrence protested it was nothing. The letter broke off there, with cheerful remarks on other matters, but in two days it was resumed in a different tone. That morning, my father's friend said, on his way to the harbour, he happened to meet two sailors from the *Matchless*. He stopped and asked after their doctor. "Dead, sir," had been the grave, unwilling answer. "Died last night of yellow jack."

Even in his shock and distress, the kindly merchant remembered that the European mail left that day, and so turned back and wrote to my father, breaking this sad news gently, before it could reach him by other means.

This was what that letter told me on that Christmas Eve!

And this was what I had to tell my father and Dolf—poor little Dolf, whose one bright dream for all the future was the coming home of Larry! This was what I knew I had to tell! When Dolf came in to fetch me—telling me father was waiting for me, and that the lamp was lighted and the tea was ready, and it was all so nice—this was what I knew I had to tell! I put aside my father's questions about his friend's letter, telling him I would read it to him presently. I had harder work to make Dolf wait with patience, but I managed that too, and then we had tea together, in a strange, peaceful way that made it seem like a dream to me, while the words of that letter were being uttered ceaselessly—it seemed—slowly, clearly, and ceaselessly in my aching head.

"Dead! He died last night."

And this I had to tell to-night, after my father had been preparing himself for the morrow's work. We went into the kitchen, Dolf and I, and I talked to each of the poor people for a long time, and listened too, which was harder; then we went back, and as a rest for father's eyes (I said) I put down the lamp, and we sat about the fire. I tried to find shadow for myself, but the golden light would dance about me, until everything seemed to go from me, except the ruddy fire, on which my eyes were fixed, and then I told.

* * * *

How many Christmases have* passed and gone since I read that letter in the firelight? I cannot tell. Dolf has been ill for a long time, and looks so wasted and so wan that his big brother scarce will know him when they meet in heaven—earth will never now hold one hope to keep him here. Every night he goes to rest with the old daguerreotype against his lips, and some morning—so I fancy—I shall find him lie just so, and know that he will never wake. And I cannot hold him here with all my love. Father moves and speaks like a shadow, spending long hours with Dolf beside his mother's grave, and is anxious now, he says, to leave the people for whom he can no longer work.

Granny is dead, and strangers are living in her home, but for me the years have to be lived—and only one day at a time! My hair is grey, and my eyes feel very, very old, but still there are hundreds of days to come. My father's rest is my recompense for all parish work; Dolf's love is my comfort in my lost happiness; any affection that may be given me by the poor is my blessing. That is all I will think of. How long is it since he died? Shall I always see his face in the fire, as I see it there to-night? It is a Christmas night. Dolf's head is in my lap, and father's hand in mine. I wonder how long—No, I cannot tell how long it is since the night I read of Larry's death, and heard that terrible

cry from little Dolf's white lips. I cannot count, it seems so many years, and I have lived so much since then. I have grown so weak, too, and so childish in my weakness, that now, because Dolf suddenly lifts his head from my knee—as I have often and often, in the old times, seen him do at the first sound, however distant, of his brother's step—I feel a pang shoot through my heart which is unbearable. And when the child springs up and leaves me, I rise with my hands upon my head, faint and bewildered.

Am I awaking? Was it only in a dream that the years had passed us by? Only a long, long thought of what they needs must bring. Only one of my long, lonely, fireside thoughts, as I looked into the darkened future? Have I really not yet told them of that letter? And was it only this morning that it came? Only this morning, and I have still to tell—

It seems such a strange, strange sound to break that thought of mine—Dolf's laugh. Yes; Dolf's forgotten laugh, and one word from father's lips, in the old glad tone that I had quite forgotten—

“Larry!”

Then—oh, yes, I did indeed, quite of my own accord, and crying like a baby, too! Afterwards I told him that it was no wonder, because he was my brother. But he said he was not, and that I knew quite well he was not, and that was why I—

Yes, he was too bad about that; kissing me again and again, even before father and Dolf, without the slightest compunction, and then saying I had set him the example. And I could not be angry, nor dignified, nor—anything; only so glad and grateful! And Larry knew, Oh, Larry knew quite well—just as my husband knows it all to-day.

I do not remember that we were any of us very sensible or coherent that night, but when I showed that letter (as I felt it my duty to do, to explain my ridiculous joy at seeing Lawrence) we found out how his mistake had arisen.

The senior surgeon of the *Matchless* had died of yellow fever the very day after Larry (being overworked) had had sick-leave granted him. He had heard this before he started homewards in the very mail which brought us the merchant's letter.

THE END.

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